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3 SONGS

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Traditional Scottish

CLAP
Steve Howe

MIDSUMMER MOON
Al Petteway



Luthier Andy Powers and the Taylor K14ce

WHY TAYLOR GUITARS IS ROLLING THE DICE (AGAIN)

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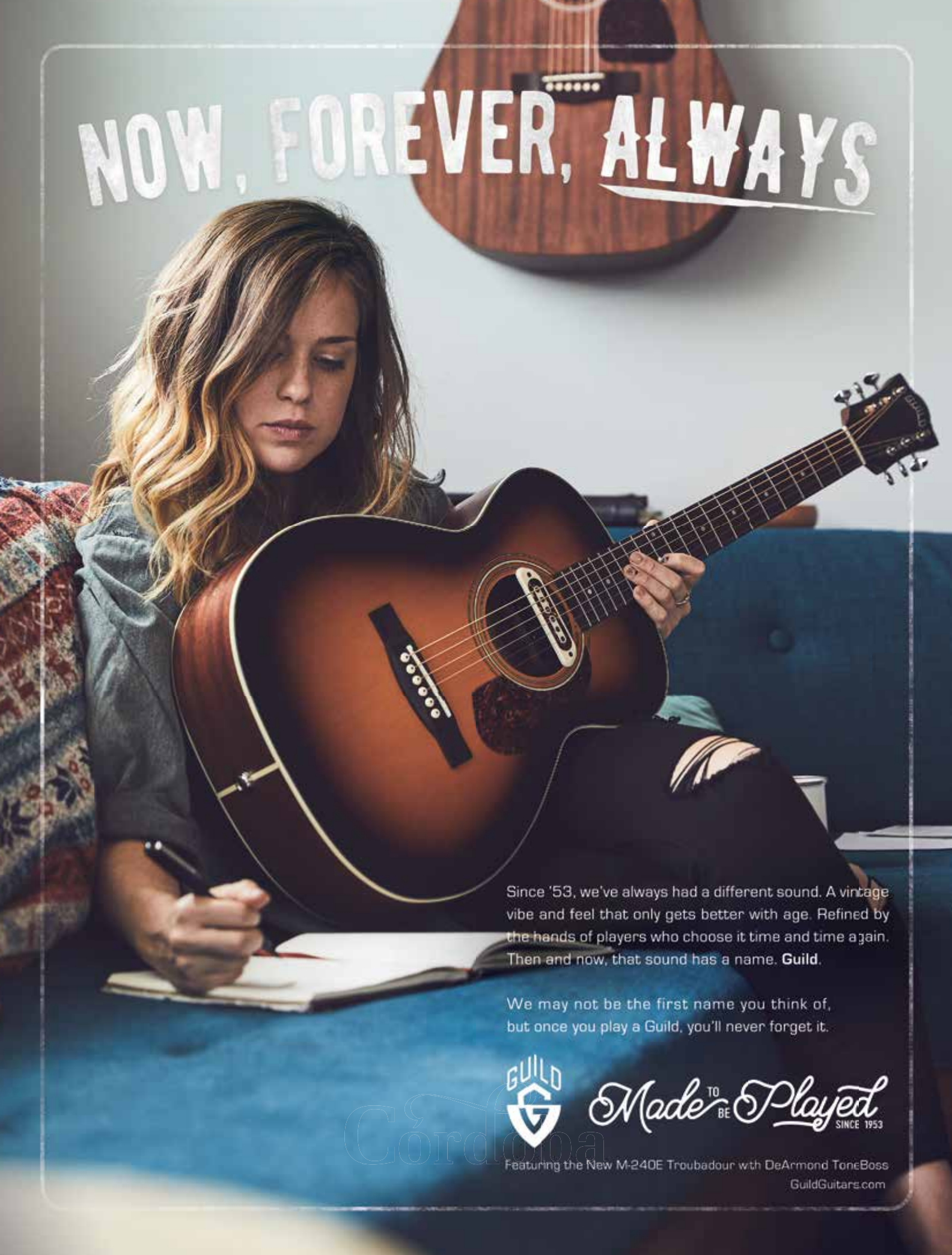
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THE FRONT PORCH

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, the definition of graciousness might be to create a Memorial Fund in honor of your imitator's passing. That's how C.F. (Chris) Martin IV recently decided to recognize the unique contributions and many talents of his long-time friend and competitor, luthier Bill Collings, who died on July 14 at the untimely age of 68.

In a tribute to Collings, Nashville guitar dealer George Gruhn summed it up this way: "In the '70s and into the late '80s, Collings and Santa Cruz both were building many guitars which might be viewed as Martin clones. But it was a time when Martin's workmanship, by many players' standards, was not up to what they wanted and certainly not up to the standards of the so-called good old days. Bill Collings produced guitars that were meticulously clean, set-up well, played well, and sounded good, and often enough offered features that were significantly different from new Martins."


"The Lustermint"

Before his recent retirement, Dick Boak, Martin's own museum director and archivist, remarked: "I work for Martin, and Collings is a competitor, but the interesting thing is that his interpretations of Martin designs inspired us to recognize the importance of our own vintage guitars and to pay more attention to that. With the Golden Era and Authentic instruments, we have to acknowledge that Bill Collings spurred us on to those areas, which have been very successful for us and certainly equally successful for Collings."

While Bill Collings' ample spirit will long be kept alive by musicians and audiences through the instruments he built, Chris Martin saw his passing through the prism of the industry in which they both thrived. As chairman of the NAMM Foundation, the charitable arm of the National Association of Music Merchants, Martin oversees a grant-making budget of $675,000, benefiting two dozen music education and advocacy organizations, among them SongwritingWith:Soldiers (featured in this issue's story on Mary Gauthier), Guitars in the Classroom, and the Teaching Guitar Workshops I discussed in last month's Front Porch note.

"I thought it was appropriate to honor Bill because of our mutual love of guitars and guitar building," Martin recalls, "and I'm glad I was able to kick-start this wonderful opportunity to give back to our industry through the NAMM Foundation."

As the owner of one of Collings' quirkier instruments, a maple C10 Bill reluctantly finished at my request in a brilliant jade green (and which the guitarist/songwriter and instrument dealer Marc Silber instantly dubbed "The Lustermint"), I can think of no better use of my money than to join Chris Martin in contributing to the new Bill Collings Memorial Fund, 100% of which will be immediately put to work in the field of guitar education. I suspect there are many *Acoustic Guitar* readers who share my conviction, in which case your next move would be to visit nammfoundation.org/donate-bill-collings-fund. Thanks for that, and I'll let you know next month how much the fund has grown through your generosity.

—David A. Lusterman
David.Lusterman@Stringletter.com

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FEEDBACK

TOMMY KNOCKER

I like reading *Acoustic Guitar* and look forward to its delivery each month. But seriously, who on your staff has the crush on Tommy Emmanuel? Every month there is another long and boring love fest over this guy (who always seems like he's on "speed" when interviewed). I'm sure he's a nice person, but are there no other musicians worth highlighting? No guitar factories you can visit or write about? Come on, this is ridiculous! How about a flamenco musician? Or an up and coming classical guitarist? How about some unknown Gypsy or street musicians? What about the history of the guitar? Anything. But no more Tommy—I'm begging you.

—Tom MacDougall, Santa Fe, NM

(Ed. note: Tom, don't turn to pages 37 or 79.)

MISTER GUITAR

I don't know how you got from toilet paper crinklers to Chet Atkins, but your March 2018 issue illustrated how influential he was. If you watch videos of him, you will come to the same conclusion that it doesn't matter what level of school you achieved, but how much education you have acquired. What makes Chet so special is the fact that he passed that on to others. He will always be a musical treasure.

—Bradford Milburn, Arlington, TX

CGP came from a photographer. I sat at a table one morning at Cracker Barrel with the usual crowd who met there when Chet had free breakfast for everyone. Somebody brought a stack of LPs, and Chet was signing them. He held up one cover and told us the guy who took the picture called himself a Certified Photographer. So Chet started calling himself a Certified Guitar Picker. He never mentioned giving himself a degree, but I would not be surprised because he was very much interested in higher education; he carried around a calculus book in his 40s.

—Paul McGill, via email

BIG LOVE FOR SMALL SHOPS

I very much enjoyed reading about Amazing Grace Music (in the February 2018 issue). Small local music stores with knowledgeable, reputable luthiers seem to be disappearing. Here, in Lebanon, New Hampshire, we are blessed to have Neil and Sally Laurent, who run Bear Hollow Vintage Guitars. There is a constant flow of new and used instruments coming through the store, and occasionally, some noteworthy folks who are in the area for skiing and vacationing drop in. As opposed to large chain operations, what I appreciate is being able to try a guitar before purchasing. Neil and Sally are dear friends that are like family and will make you feel welcome. Neil might even play you a rousing chorus of "Take Me Home Whiskey."

—Andy Berry, Lebanon, NH

I was sorry to see Music Folk in Webster Groves, Missouri (near St Louis), missing from the recent article on local music stores. Andy and Don Ploof are the owners, and they have an amazing collection of vintage and new high-end instruments. They also carry stuff like hammered dulcimers, lap dulcimers, tambos, etc.—nothing electric as I recall. I try to stop in whenever I'm in the vicinity.

—Jake Miller, Rehobeth, AL

I've had my own music store called World Music of Sugar Land for over ten years now. I know the difficulties in keeping going in the music business, especially in the retail area (and also as a gigging musician). Teaching lessons, doing sales and repairs, and the occasional recording session have kept me going so far, but I would say that small time mom-and-pop music stores like mine are seeing their last days due to the corporations and internet competition. Recycling used instruments, carrying a few collectibles, and offering lessons are just about the only things that keep me going. I love my work, and teaching is very rewarding. It's just sad to see such a wonderful industry that did so much from the last century until now fade away. Like you, I remember my high school days, skipping school and hanging out at the music stores trying new guitars, amplifiers, and effects. The people who worked there were always exceptional and willing to help you with their favorite hobby, music. Perhaps this will all come back around someday, even if we aren't here to enjoy it.

—Lloyd Ernstes, Missouri City, TX

We want to hear from you! Share at editors.AG@stringletter.com and facebook.com/AcousticGuitarMagazine







Al Petteway playing the Martin 00-42 that Dick Boak had made for him by the Martin Custom Shop.

WAYNE EBINGER, WEBINGERPHOTO@GMAIL.COM

GUITAR TALK

Al Petteway Goes to Washington

The fingerstyle great does a friend a favor and emerges with a new album

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

In the summer of 2017, Grammy-winning guitarist Al Petteway got an interesting proposition from Anthony Russo, a former student and guitar aficionado. Russo was feeling pretty good about how his collection of fine instruments had evolved in recent years. He wanted Petteway to visit his house and play the luthier-built guitars, so that he could hear what they sound like from a listener's perspective, and, more important, document them on a recording. "I immediately accepted Tony's invitation," says Petteway, himself a collector. "It would have been great just to hang out with Tony, but this was quite a special opportunity."

Russo, an attorney and lobbyist in the Washington, DC area, offered to fly Petteway from his home in Asheville, North Carolina, to Northern Virginia. Petteway soon began assembling gear for the informal recording sessions. He packed a pair of matched Sennheiser MKH 40 microphones and, wanting to travel light, an Apple iPad Pro. "I also found a small and inexpensive interface that would work with the iPad—Roland's Duo-Capture EX—and I downloaded a $20 recording app called Aura LE. I figured that this setup would be good enough for memorializing the guitars."

When Petteway arrived at Russo's house in mid-August, he was floored by the top-shelf guitars that his friend had assembled—a couple of Traugotts, a BK Fan Fret and an R; a Somogyi OM; a Smallman nylon-string; an Olson SJ; a Greenfield G1.2; a Walker OM; a Lowden O-35; a Martin OM-45 GE; and a Ryan Mission Grand Concert. "I've played thousands of great guitars at Dream Guitars," Petteway says, referring to the shop not far from his house, where he often does video demos of instruments, "but this collection was something else."

Russo says, "I knew I had some nice guitars, but I didn't understand just how great they were until I heard Al, this master guitarist, playing them."

Petteway spent a day playing Russo compositions from his catalog, and Russo selected a couple of dozen to use for the project. Afterwards, Petteway set up his rig and made a test recording. When he listened back with headphones, he found an unpleasant surprise. "It was really hot outside, and the air conditioning was really loud. Tony was so used to the sound of the air conditioning that he had blocked it out and hadn't considered that it would detract from the sound of the recording."



COURTESY OF TONY RUSSO

Tony Russo and his guitars: 1) Martin OM-45 Golden Era—Adirondack spruce top/Brazilian rosewood sides and back; 2) Somogyi Mod D—European spruce/Brazilian rw; 3) Ryan MGC—Cedar/Indian rw; 4) Greenfield G1.2—alpine spruce/Malaysian blackwood; 5) (in his hands) Greenfield G4.2 —Adirondack/"The Tree" mahogany; 6) Traugott BK Fan Fret—German spruce/Brazilian rw; 7) Greenfield G2.2—alpine spruce /Malaysian bw; 8) Olson SJ (Presentation)—cedar/Brazilian rw; 9) Lowden O35x (40th Anniversary)—redwood/Brazilian rw; 10) Smallman classical—cedar/rw

The next day Russo and Petteway repaired to an un-air-conditioned portion of the house, a small porch with a glass enclosure. Petteway played a few notes on a guitar, and he and Russo were struck by how good the room sounded. The guitarist set up his recording equipment, placing the iPad on a TV-dinner tray and arranging the Sennheisers in a close-miked stereo configuration (the ORTF technique, which was pioneered in 1960 at the Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française in France), to minimize background noises, like children playing outside. Russo selected the best Petteway composition for each guitar, and the guitarist, trying to ignore how hot it was inside, worked for hours on end. "It felt so inspiring to be playing in that room and putting on what was essentially a private concert for Tony," Petteway says. "I must have recorded 16 tunes in a row, most of them in only one take."

Things didn't go as well the day after that. "It felt like everyone in the area decided to mow their lawns on the same day," Petteway says, laughing, adding that the noise made additional recording in the sunroom all but impossible.

Still, Petteway had plenty of good material in the can. Reviewing things with Russo, he was pleased by how naturally he had played and didn't mind the occasional anomalies, like unintended notes. And both Petteway and Russo were surprised by the sonic quality of the recording, which greatly exceeded their expectations. "We just couldn't believe how much warmth and detail we'd gotten from the iPad and cheap interface," Petteway says.

On the last day of Petteway's visit, Russo asked if he could buy the recording rig, microphones included, and Petteway obliged his friend. By the time he was back in North Carolina, it had occurred to Petteway and Russo that they had made not just an audio document of Russo's collection, but music for public consumption. It didn't feel quite complete, though, so Petteway got to work in his home studio. Using a matched pair of Miktek C5 microphones, an API preamp, and MOTU Performer 9.5 audio software, he recorded his most recent compositions on some of his own favorite guitars: a custom Martin 00-42, a Circa OM-28, a Tippin Al Petteway Signature, a Sifel Dryad dreadnought, a Knaggs/Sifel Night Sky, and a Thompson 000-12. "I was extremely pleased at how well the iPad recordings held up to the ones done at my home with much more expensive equipment," Petteway says.

Still, to prepare the album for general release, it seemed ideal to use a skilled mastering engineer, especially since the job would involve matching levels on 16 guitars recorded in two different rooms with two different rigs. Petteway and Russo enlisted two of the best in the business—Greg Lukens and Bill Wolf, the latter of whom has worked with acoustic legends like Tony Rice and Doc Watson—to master the audio.

The end results are heard on Petteway's latest album, *The Collector's Passion* (see a transcription of "Midsummer Moon" on page 62), all solo guitar and without any overdubs. "Not only is the album a celebration of fine handcrafted guitars, it just goes to show that you don't necessarily need to spend lots of time in the studio with the clock ticking to get beautiful results," Petteway says. **AG**



Garcia (L) with Robert Hunter in the Hart Valley Drifters, 1962

JERALD MELROSE

Jerry Garcia 'Before the Dead'

New box set sheds light on rock legend's roots in folk music

BY BLAIR JACKSON

There are many Grateful Dead fans—I among them—who believe that some of the most interesting music Jerry Garcia played from the late '80s until his death in 1995 was with his acoustic side projects, first with the Jerry Garcia Acoustic Band and then with David Grisman and some of the mandolinist's musical pals (including Tony Rice). For Garcia, those comparatively low-pressure playing and recording situations represented a return to his early '60s pre-Grateful Dead roots, when he was diving headlong into bluegrass, folk, blues, and old-timey music in an area south of San Francisco known as the Peninsula. Those years had an enormous impact on the musician he became when he plugged in with the Dead (originally the Warlocks) in 1965; indeed, some of the old repertoire followed him into the Dead, and he often spoke about how his electric guitar style had been informed by his four years playing acoustic guitar and banjo in a succession of short-lived acoustic groups.

Now, several hours of Garcia's early folk forays have been brought together in a spectacular new box set called *Before the Dead*, a project spearheaded by executive producers Marc Allan and Kevin Monty that's scheduled for a May 11 release by the Jerry Garcia Family LLC. It's available in several formats: as a 4-CD set, via digital download, and—most striking of all—in a beautifully designed limited-edition (2,500) 5-LP box that includes a full-size 34-page book loaded with original essays about the songs, the origins of the mostly homegrown recordings, the folk milieu on the Peninsula, Garcia and his musical mates in that era (1961–64), and loads of rare photographs and memorabilia. The set was lovingly put together by co-producers Dennis McNally—who was the Dead's longtime publicist, official biographer, and friend of Garcia's—and Brian Miksis, an archivist and researcher of the Bay Area folk scene (as well as a location sound mixer for TV/film) with a deep, scholarly interest in Garcia's pre-Dead days.

McNally had tracked down numerous tapes from Garcia's friends and other sources over the course of more than two decades researching his 2002 tome, *A Long Strange Trip: The Inside History of the Grateful Dead*, and when Miksis, who was starting work on a documentary film about the period, cold-called McNally to glean any info he could, the two compared notes, and the germ of their eventual partnership on this project was born.

Though much of the music has been in circulation among hardcore Deadhead collectors for many years, Miksis and McNally managed to hunt down the master reels of several tapes previously available only on inferior-sounding cassette copies. The search also unearthed never-before-heard tapes that shed more light on Garcia's formative years. These included a wonderful, high-quality 1962 recording of the bluegrass Hart Valley Drifters made at the studio of Stanford University radio station KZSU (released in 2016 as a single CD called *Folk Time* and also included here), and, perhaps most exciting of all, the oldest extant recording of Garcia, from May 1961: He's 18, still fresh out of the Army, playing old folk tunes, with his future lyric-writing partner Robert Hunter helping out on vocals, at the 16th birthday party-turned-hootenanny of his close friend Barbara (now Brigid) Meier. Even though he'd only been playing a short time, Garcia already shows great promise, and it's a kick to hear the duo sounding so confident

and leading sing alongs on folk standards such as "Oh, Mary Don't You Weep," "Santy Anno, "Rake and a Rambling Boy," and more.

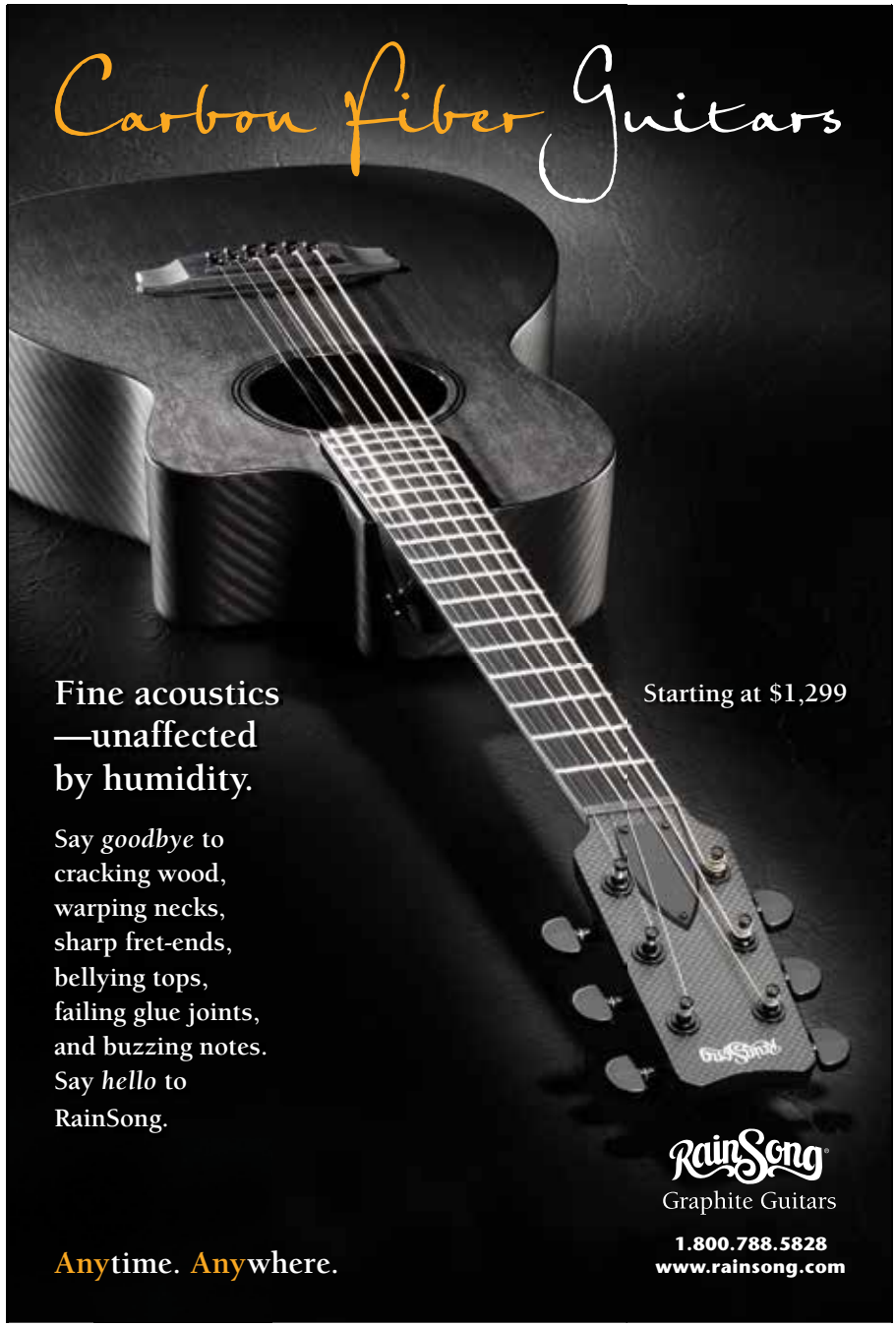
"With that first tape, you're hearing him mostly strum," McNally said in *Relix* magazine last year. "And what's striking about that tape, among other things, is the way people glued onto this 18-year-old kid. He had a presence as a performer that was way beyond his skills as a player from day one. There's just something about his personality, and that's why he had an audience spellbound at 18."

From that auspicious opening, the box follows Garcia's evident musical maturation as he starts playing publicly in various old-time and bluegrass configurations, including a duo with his first wife, Sara Ruppenthal, and groups with colorful monikers such as the Sleepy Hollow Hog Stompers, the Wildwood Boys, the Black Mountain Boys, and the Asphalt Jungle Mountain Boys. Along the way, such (now) nationally known pickers as Eric Thompson, Jody Stecher, David Nelson, and Sandy Rothman cycled in and out of the groups. (Nelson and Rothman were also in the late '80s Jerry Garcia Acoustic Band.) The material spans the history of folk, country, and bluegrass music, from traditional mountain tunes all the way up to the then-contemporary murder ballad "Long Black Veil." Garcia and his fellow travelers were very serious about this music, and they treat it with the utmost respect.

"From what I've learned," comments Miksis, "it seems that Jerry worked harder than anyone to study and emulate his heroes. And he seems to have done so quite successfully. I suppose the proof of that is in the story of Bill Monroe suggesting that Jerry audition for [banjo player] Bill Keith's spot when he left the Blue Grass Boys. It's fascinating to consider music history if he had actually done it. But to realize that he was essentially self-taught on guitar and banjo, and then taught others, is pretty amazing as you listen to these recordings. He began to play acoustic guitar in 1961 and by the following year, he had developed quite a level of technique, as heard on the Hart Valley Drifters' material. Then, in 1963 he went from frailing on the banjo to quick-study of Earl Scruggs and Bill Keith's five-finger bluegrass technique. The level at which he developed his vocal style shouldn't be overlooked either."

Though the box is certainly aimed primarily at Deadheads, Miksis says, "My hope is that the set will have appeal to a wide base of music lovers. For Deadheads, I hope that they will enjoy being able to track some familiar songs, like 'Deep Elem Blues,' back to their rich heritage and see where Jerry got much of his initial spark of love for the American Songbook. It will hopefully become more clear that Hunter and Garcia drew from this material deeply for a lot of what they wrote together, particularly during the *Workingman's Dead* and *American Beauty* period. But I also hope that lovers of general folk and bluegrass will enjoy this as an important archival release. It covers the story of the early '60s folk revival quite well in scope."

What began as what Miksis calls a "shoot-for-the-stars idea I had ten years ago" more than lives up to its promise. The combination of outstanding music, thoughtful essays by Sara Ruppenthal and bluegrass historian Neil Rosenburg, deep historical context provided by McNally and Miksis—including the known origins of every song—make this a valuable and entertaining document of a very special, now vanished time. In retrospect, it's hard to believe that less than a year after playing the last music on *Before the Dead*, Garcia would leave this scene behind for electric blues, rock 'n' roll, and the psychedelic explorations that would make him a legend. Still, these formative folk years stayed with him until the end. His final recording session, shortly before his death in 1995: An acoustic version of Jimmie Rodgers' "Blue Yodel No. 9." **AG**





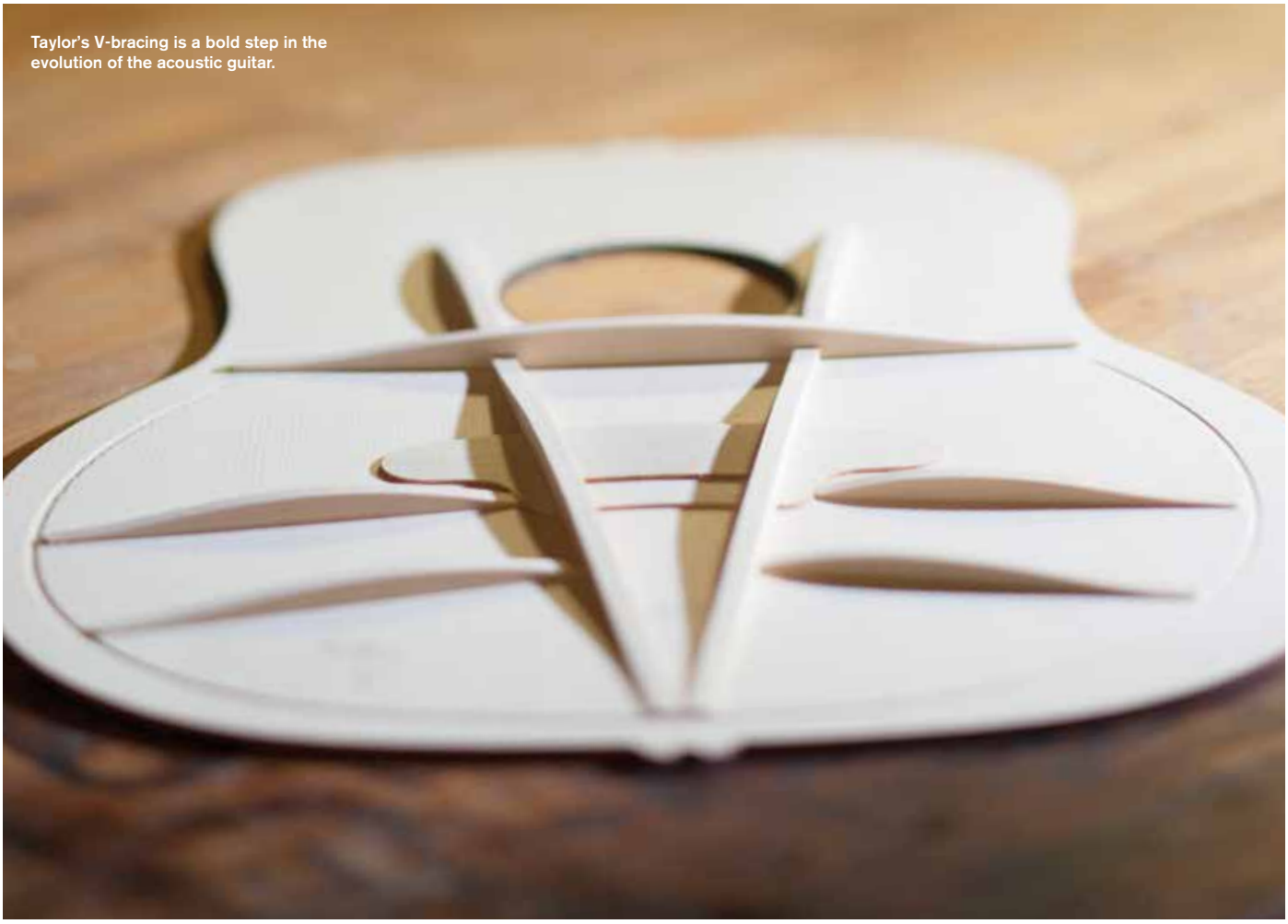
V MARKS THE SPOT

WITH DECADES OF TRAILBLAZING GUITAR-MAKING UNDER ITS BELT, TAYLOR GUITARS ROLLS THE DICE (AGAIN)

BY BRIAN WISE



COURTESY OF TAYLOR GUITARS



Taylor's V-bracing is a bold step in the evolution of the acoustic guitar.

COURTESY OF TAYLOR GUITARS

In an age when eye-catching, futuristic musical instrument designs grab headlines and social media buzz—whether it's a 3D-printed violin or a sleek, carbon-fiber piano—a new system of guitar bracing might appear to be a tougher sell. After all, these braces, which reinforce a guitar's top and back, are all but invisible to the player and listener, and they can seem rather inconsequential even to a guitarist.

But some guitar lovers know how crucial the unglamorous bracing is to the sound and playability of any instrument. When Taylor Guitars unveiled its new V-Class bracing system in January, the company insisted it would be a groundbreaking step designed to boost the volume and sustain of its instruments, while also improving their intonation. The company presented several models to dealers, the music press, and select performers, followed by a formal rollout at the 2018 Winter NAMM trade show in Anaheim, California.

Bob Taylor, who cofounded the El Cajon, California–based company in 1974, said it was time to "stop trying to tweak our inventory within an inch of its life" and instead make a bolder, more decisive change. He entrusted Andy Powers, the company's 37-year-old master designer, to develop a new system that would challenge X-bracing, long the most popular pattern for flattop guitars, and pioneered by Taylor's closest competitor, C.F. Martin. The new system would signify a passing of the baton (or pick) as Powers makes his mark on a company whose greatest designs have upended tradition.

A DANCE OF STRENGTH AND FLEXIBILITY

As the name implies, V-bracing consists of two braces that join at the base of the top, near the end block, and extend out on either side of the soundhole in the form of a V. Three cross-braces add further support. "I took a fresh look at the X-brace design and thought, Well, for one, it works pretty good," Powers told *Acoustic Guitar*. "But it represents a compromise. That compromise would be: How do you make something that's really strong *and* really flexible? How can it be those two things?"

More to the point, Powers identified an uneasy tradeoff between volume and sustain. The rigidity of X-bracing, he says, enables notes to have a longer sustain—the kind of effect one finds on a solidbody guitar like a Gibson Les Paul, for example. But achieving volume requires a more flexible surface that promotes air movement. A banjo, with its flexible drumhead, has such qualities—tremendous volume with little sustain. "You try and tweak that balance between volume and sustain and sometimes you lean a little more in one direction or another," Powers said of his quandary.

Powers, who is a lifelong surfer and occasional surfboard shaper, had a revelation one morning as he watched the waves off the San Diego coast. He observed how a stone jetty was funneling the churning surf into smoother wave patterns. Watching further, he wondered if one could create a bracing pattern that would have a similar effect. It would allow the sides of a guitar body to freely vibrate, enhancing volume while providing a stiff foundation for the strings, thereby promoting sustain.

"Calm, still waters with good waves coming in—that's what I wanted to happen," Powers said. As he developed a solution, he also fell back on his studies of mandolin, violin, and archtop guitar construction. [See Shop Talk sidebar.]

With so much contemporary popular music played on electronic instruments and relying on pitch-corrected vocals, guitarists are increasingly expected to have flawless intonation. Powers discovered that the V-bracing had the added effect of improving intonation within chords. "There's always a fighting, or beating, between what a guitar can deliver and the note you're actually trying to play," he noted. "You get this rub. There's a friction," which Powers says can make a guitar sound slightly out-of-tune.

George Gruhn, the owner of Gruhn Guitars in Nashville, Tennessee, was pleased with a model that he tried last year. "Tone is difficult to describe, but in general, I think the V-brace gives a remarkably well-balanced sound," he said. "It seems to cancel out some conflicting harmonics that make things sound out of tune at times. It's one of the most in-tune guitars I've ever played by any maker."

BUILDING ON A HISTORY OF INNOVATION

Powers' use of a surf analogy recalls an early episode in the history of this Southern California company. In one of his first, scrappy efforts to rethink guitar construction procedures, Bob Taylor sought to decorate a fretboard with mother-of-pearl. Unaware that he could purchase the materials at a guitar shop, Taylor went diving for abalone off the coast of La Jolla, broke up the shells with a hammer, and ground the pearl into usable pieces. This freewheeling approach to materials and craftsmanship has underpinned the company's design changes over the decades, whether it was the launch of computer-controlled production machinery in the 1980s, inventing a new type of bolt-on neck joint in the 1990s, or investing heavily in sourcing sustainable wood in recent years.



The new Taylor label with both Bob and Andy's signatures

GREG OLWELL

To this day, Taylor and company co-founder Kurt Listug insist that a skilled artisan should be high up in the corporate ranks. "Think of other guitar builders," Taylor says, "and ask yourself, 'Can I put a name to that company's luthier? What's the wellspring of their guitars?'"

The son of a carpenter and artist in Oceanside, California, Powers crafted his first guitar by the age of eight. As a home-schooled teenager, he began building and selling guitars and ukuleles to his friends. After receiving an associate of arts degree from MiraCosta College in San Diego, he studied guitar performance and musicology at the University of California at San Diego. During this time, he established the Andy Powers Instrument Co.

Just as his business was starting to evolve, Powers crossed paths with Bob Taylor, who eventually set up a meeting and convinced him to join his company. The veteran guitar builder was planning for the future of the company, with the eventual goal of scaling back his direct involvement, and needed a builder with deep historical knowledge and the potential to stay on for the long haul.

Since Powers' arrival, he has ushered in several changes to Taylor's line of guitars: revoicing the company's top-selling 800 and 600 series, introducing a line of small-body 12-string guitars, and making a number of subtle bracing changes across the catalog. But company officials see Powers' V-bracing development as analogous to an automaker that moves from internal combustion to an electric-powered engine.

The system is being introduced immediately on four of the company's high-end guitars. The first, a new Builder's Edition (K14ce, priced at $4,999), combines Hawaiian koa back and sides with a torrefied Sitka spruce top, and a new-style cutaway. [See review on page 74.] The others: an all-koa Grand Auditorium (K24ce, priced at $4,499); the rosewood 900 Series (914ce, $4,999); and the top-end Presentation series, with striped West African ebony back and sides and a redwood top (PS14ce, $8,999).

Powers, who drives around his hometown in a restored vintage pickup truck, and describes himself as a "pretty old-fashioned guy," creates his designs with pencil and paper, chisels, and a set of cartographer tools passed down from his great, great grandfather. The V-bracing design took shape as he tested concepts built first with hand tools and then translated into design software and made on Taylor's CNC machines.


Andy Powers and Bob Taylor

COURTESY OF TAYLOR GUITARS

"A lot of the guys around the shop talk smack," he said, referring to his sometimes-quaint approach. "They're really smart guys—talented machinists and engineers. In fact, we have a recent MIT grad whose specialty is computer modeling. So I'll draw this out with pencils and these old cartography tools, and get something exactly the way I want it. He constructs a more detailed computer model."

STEPPING OUT INTO THE WORLD

While there is a big transition with Powers' vision for the future of the company's guitars taking over the founder's vision, the foundation of Taylor Guitars as a modern guitar maker remains rooted in traditional materials. The V-braced guitars use customary tonewoods like Sitka and Adirondack spruce and conventional wood glues and screws. Outwardly, the guitars are distinguishable from Taylor's X-braced models only by a black graphite nut, instead of an off-white one. Additionally, a new design for the label will highlight Powers' signature, while folding Bob Taylor's signature into the background. "We want to signal that our company has a guitar maker, and changing the label is a really big deal to us," said Taylor.

Michael Simmons, a sales manager at Gryphon Stringed Instruments in Palo Alto, California, was pleased with several models that he tried. "They sound just like a Taylor, only more so," he said. "They are bright, with a strong, balanced midrange and a clear, resonant bass. They sound wonderful when fingerpicked. They're really good, modern-sounding guitars."

Simmons notes that Taylors have recently been outselling Martins in his shop, but cautions, "The world is not going to start doing V-bracing. In some ways, from a guitar-weenie perspective, it's a really big deal and a major change," said Simmons, who is also a cofounder of *The Fretboard Journal*. "But when



COURTESY OF TAYLOR GUITARS

SHOP TALK

Following a tour of Taylor's ultramodern factory in El Cajon on a warm Southern California morning, I had a chance to speak with Andy Powers about how he mashed together many ideas to come up with his new design. As we sat on stools in his workshop, Powers animated his ideas by grabbing braces to demonstrate how his vision came together.

–Greg Olwell

Where did some of your ideas for V-bracing come from? It reminds me a bit of the parallel bracing from an archtop guitar.

I'm a huge archtop guitar fan–I love playing them, I love making them, I love looking at them. I've built archtops with X-braces and parallel braces and I like the volume and sustain I can get out of parallel-braced designs–which are never parallel, they're more like a V. So, the V comes from the archtop, but it's backwards from the way it would usually be.

How did you get to the backwards version?

Well, I wanted to put them in the center. I knew from building many kinds of X-braced instruments that an X offers a lot of torsional stiffness and I can adjust them like this [*holding two braces in the air and making wider and narrower Xs, and moving them forward or backward*]. I know from building parallel-braced archtops that those longitudinal braces are really strong. I didn't want to put it right in the middle, because I have a soundhole. But if I kept it mostly central, it could be strong, but also flexible enough to really move. By splaying them this way, I can get the guitar to distribute it evenly into both halves of the guitar and get the whole thing to physically move.

The braces don't tuck into the kerfing as they do on a typical flattop guitar, they stop short.

They don't need to–it's not a benefit if they do. In fact, in this situation, it's more of a hindrance. We do the same thing with our Performance bracing, which are X-braced guitars.

On an X-braced guitar, most of the time you want the braces to go into the kerfing because the top is working in a different way. But by stopping the braces short of the lining, you change the boundary, the rim, of that guitar. Most of our guitars have a channel that runs around the lower bout that we call the relief rout, and what that does is define the functional perimeter. The rim is not as uniform if you leave that up to the lining or kerfing, but the relief rout fixes that.

you compare them through the ears of someone who doesn't do this eight or ten hours a day, six days a week, it's a small change. It's like tweaking the tone controls."

Guitar builders have tried different bracing patterns since before the Civil War, an era when C.F. Martin is generally credited with having introduced the first X-braced guitars. Though X-bracing dominates the modern steel-string acoustic world, other patterns have emerged over time. In the 1920s and 1930s, ladder bracing took hold, promoted by low-cost department store brands like Silvertone, sold by Sears, and the Oscar Schmidt Company, a favorite of door-to-door salesmen. Other luthiers have employed a reinforced double-A pattern; Martin has used an A-frame X in select guitars.

The tight competition between Taylor and Martin is shown in the numbers: Both have budgets slightly over $100 million, and while Martin in 2016 had 968 employees, Taylor had 870, according to *Music Trades*. Any sweeping change poses a risk to its market share. "I would not want to bet my company on it," said one veteran dealer, who spoke about the company's transition to V-bracing on condition of anonymity.

Bob Taylor considers the V-bracing a risk but a highly calculated one. "Dealers were like, 'Holy crap, how are you going to do this? Some of them were like, 'I don't want you to do this, but you have to do this.'" He adds: "It's something we feel is good business in the long run. We can't just try to satisfy the latest craze. It's like mom and dad have to figure out what's best for the family; we're going to figure out how to go forward."

By starting out with a quartet of elite models, Taylor officials believe they can better manage the transition to V-bracing throughout the company's El Cajon–built guitars. Depending on customer response, the company plans to gradually add the new bracing pattern to other series over the next three years.

It remains to be seen if Taylor can maintain its fabled consistency in the process of the rollout. Simmons wonders if the company has hit a sweet spot, but cautions that some guitar makers reach a peak and then overrefine their instruments, going too far in their quest for innovation.

But Bob Taylor insists the company aims to keep one foot rooted in the distant past. "Andy's just trying to make amazing guitars," he said. "When we look to the next 40 years, we felt we needed to look in a direction that will involve a new class of bracing. That could take us into the next 100 years of innovations." AG

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Mary Gauthier talks with war veteran Josh Geartz

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARY GAUTHIER

SOLDIERS' STORIES

How Mary Gauthier co-wrote songs with veterans on *Rifles and Rosary Beads*

BY JEFFREY PEPPER RODGERS



L TO R: ROB SPOHR, JOSH GEARTZ, JOE BARTOSIAK, MARY GAUTHIER, JAMES HOUSE + KATE LEE



MARY GAUTHIER WITH VETERAN + CO-WRITER JAMIE TRENT



Mary Gauthier with Joe Costello

COURTESY OF MARY GAUTHIER

In 2015, singer-songwriter Mary Gauthier was sipping coffee inside the Carey Center for Global Good in upstate New York, watching one of the participants arrive for a weekend retreat led by an organization called SongwritingWith:Soldiers.

"He was struggling to roll himself up a hill in an old-fashioned wheelchair, with his service dog on a leash by his side, his wife behind them looking worried and unsure of what to do," Gauthier recalls. "He clearly did not want help with the chair, and as he fought it up the hill, he stole my heart. He seemed so burdened, so sad, and so headstrong. I knew he was in a lot of emotional pain. I wanted to sit with him and help him articulate it in a song, so the song could alchemize some of his suffering."

Soon Gauthier (pronounced go-shay) got her wish and was in a writing session with the Army veteran she'd seen, Josh Geartz, who was more than struggling—he'd been secretly planning his second suicide attempt. As they talked, Geartz shared that the roadside bomb in Iraq that left him disabled in 2003 had taken the life of his best friend, and the difference in their fates haunted him. Listening to Geartz's story and jotting down notes, Gauthier started singing his words back over a simple 6/8 strum on her old Gibson J-45.

"So looking back now, who the hell knows / Where the soul of a dead soldier goes," begins "Still On the Ride," the song Geartz and Gauthier wrote together that day. "Guardian angels, maybe they're true / My guardian angel, maybe it's you."

"Still On the Ride" is one of many emotionally powerful tracks on Gauthier's new album, *Rifles and Rosary Beads,* comprised of songs she co-wrote through SongwritingWith:Soldiers. This project marks a new chapter for Gauthier, a masterful storyteller in song who's been one of the most respected voices of the folk/Americana scene since the late '90s—carrying on in the tradition of songwriters like Townes Van Zandt, Lucinda Williams, and Steve Earle. In 2014 she began working with the SongwritingWith:Soldiers program, founded by Texas troubadour Darden Smith, which pairs professional songwriters with veterans and their spouses to put their stories into song and help them work through trauma.

"I've used songwriting in a variety of ways to save my own ass," says Gauthier, who battled drug and alcohol addiction before devoting herself to music in her mid-30s. "Now, through the work with the veterans, I'm finding it's a useful skill in service to others who are struggling."

IN THE WRITING ROOM

When Gauthier originally got involved with SongwritingWith:Soldiers, at the suggestion of fellow Nashville songsmith Darrell Scott, she had serious doubts about being a good fit for the program. Gauthier describes herself as a slow and meticulous writer, while at the weekend retreats all the songs have to be completed quickly. Plus, as a lesbian with no affiliation to the military, she worried that the veterans would not relate to her.

"The stereotypes that I had about who served in the military were so far from reality," she admits. "I pictured a group of right-wing homophobes, and I didn't know if I was the person for the job. Fortunately, I was wrong in every way."

Josh Geartz had no idea what to expect at his first SongwritingWith:Soldiers retreat—he hadn't heard of any of the songwriters and had never tried writing a song. But something clicked at the writing session with Gauthier.

"As I got comfortable with her and how open and honest she was, I started opening up more and more about things that I hadn't told anybody," he says. "And then just talking through it and not having her react in any way other than, 'Wow,' and 'I'm glad you're still here,' and 'You did what you did—don't be so hard on yourself'. . ." After several hours with Gauthier, he says, "Everything that I had built up so grand in my head, of how people would react or how they'd look at me—I could see it wasn't this big scary thing that I'd thought it was."

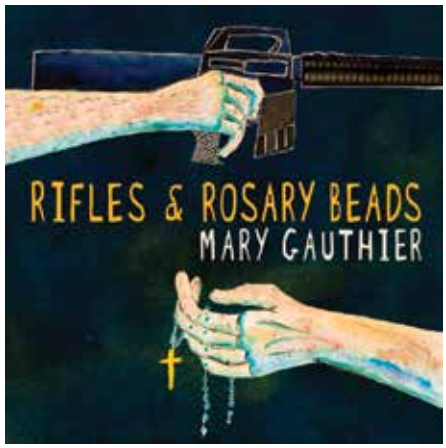
Beyond the therapeutic value of the writing process, the song Geartz wrote with Gauthier quickly took on a life of its own. A month after the retreat, she invited him to play harmonica with her on "Still On the Ride" at the Grand Ole Opry, and he began to meet all sorts of strangers who connected with his story/song. "Just going out there and saying, 'This is what happened to me and what I've done, this is how I dealt with it

is helping other people," says Geartz. "That gave me the motivation and allowed me to open up and put myself out there."

For Gauthier, one of the keys to this collaborative process is keeping the music very basic. "It's the old Harlan Howard 'three chords and the truth' mantra that works for me," she says. "So I'm not approaching it with musically complex progressions. I'm looking for key words that help me articulate what the veteran in front of me is saying. And I think keeping it simple is really important, because these stories are so complex. To get a single story out of someone who's been deployed six times, seven times, that's not easy. They've got layers and layers and layers of complex trauma, as do their wives."

In the writing sessions, Gauthier asks questions, careful to steer clear of judgment. "I'm not interested in the morality of what they did," she says. "I'm interested in the story behind those eyes that are staring at me." As she sings potential lyrics to the soldiers, she asks if they ring true. And when they do, she says, "It's like a can opener. It pries them open. The story begins to pour into the song."

The intensity of what pours out can be overwhelming at times. That was the case with



another Army veteran, Joe Costello, who cowrote the title track of *Rifles and Rosary Beads* with Gauthier. The title phrase itself came from a poem Costello had written about landing in Baghdad, in which he described how "the religious ones whispered / clutching their rifles and rosary beads." Gauthier read the poem and suggested they work with "Rifles and Rosary Beads" as the title to their song, and asked Costello to talk more about what he saw and felt in Iraq.

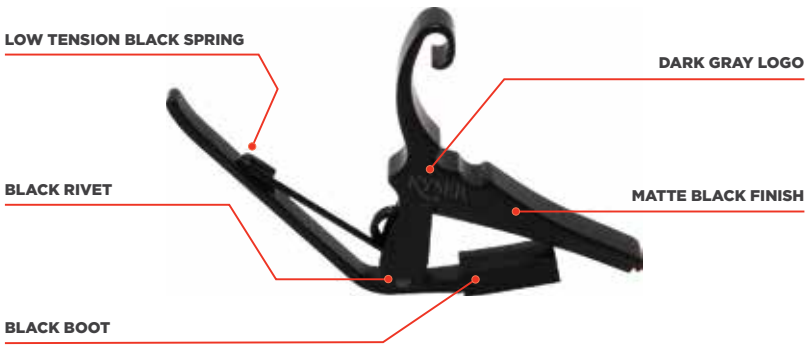
"I had a bit of a flashback when I was in the songwriting process," recalls Costello. "I could feel the sand on my skin again, I could feel the heat from the desert, and for anybody, that's a very challenging situation to be in. But Mary had the capacity to hold space for me. I cherish that moment—it was really profound. I think it forged a family feeling with her and me that's enduring."

The song Costello and Gauthier wrote together is musically serene, sung quietly over bare-bones fingerpicking. But lyrically it packs a punch, building to this final verse:

The mirror frightens me
I walk past try not to see
The stranger with blood on his hands
Brother I'm not that man

As they wrote, Costello and Gauthier needed to pause several times to let the tears flow, but at the end of the process they felt triumphant—even doing a football touchdown dance. "We knew we had a really good song," she says, "and what we had was bigger than us."

As Gauthier performs the *Rifles and Rosary Beads* songs in concert, singing stories that are not her own, she finds that the audience relates

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to them in an intensely personal way. "This switch gets flipped and they're no longer thinking about the singer, me, or the soldier, my co-writer; they're thinking about their own story, their own family," she says. "This is what empathy is. The heart opens and something really beautiful happens."

This kind of emotional connection is especially needed in this era, she adds. "Without bearing into politics too far, I think we're in an empathy crisis," she says. "There's a shortage of empathy, and that's why we're divided right now. I think songs can be the road map, or at least part of the road map, back to each other."

MOVING FORWARD

Like many veterans who've participated in SongwritingWith:Soldiers retreats, both Geartz and Costello remain involved with the program as volunteers. Costello is hoping to set up a satellite office in his home of Kalamazoo, Michigan, working with physicians interested in trauma-informed care.

With veterans, Costello says, "People are usually thinking in binary terms: 'Thank you for your service' or 'How could you do that?' I think programs like this, sharing stories through song, help us have a more transparent narrative. And so anything I can do to help people understand, to build that bridge between the military and civilian world so vets return home to a receptive group, I'm on board for that."

Geartz, meanwhile, has been on a mission to share the benefits of SongwritingWith:Soldiers. In 2017 he rode his wheelchair from Indiana to his home near Buffalo, New York—more than 400 miles—to support the program and draw attention to the fact that, on average, 20 veterans take their own lives every day. He raised enough funds to pay for last fall's songwriting retreat in New York, helping a new group of veterans put their experiences into song.

"It sounds so simple," says Geartz. "How can something so easy, just sitting with one other person talking for a couple hours, change lives? But in retreat after retreat after retreat you see it, and it works every time with every participant. As far as I know, as of today, zero participants in their programs have committed suicide. That alone should speak volumes about what they do." AG



WHAT MARY GAUTHIER PLAYS

1950 Gibson J-45—"beat up, bruised, scarred, and beautiful," she says, and perfect for working with veterans. "It's almost a mirror of how they feel." Amplification: undersaddle pickup (she's not sure what brand) through an L.R. Baggs Venue DI. Elixir NanoWeb medium strings. Shubb capo. Super thin .60 mm picks. Onboard Sabine tuner.





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A brief history of Scottish song in America

BY DANNY CARNAHAN



LEDONIA

The story of how Scottish song first made its way to America and then flavored the next several centuries of American culture would make for a great subject for a documentary filmmaker such as Ken Burns. But in the limited space available here, we must speed through the distant past and get right to the most action-packed chapter of Scots-American musical history: the past 50 years.

Plenty of academic ink has been spilled relating how Scottish dance and social music came here to stay. In the 18th and 19th centuries, countless Scots arrived in Virginia and the Carolinas and marched up into the mountains with their music, which by the 20th century had evolved into old-time American traditional music. Everywhere, the Scottish and American vernacular repertoires remain inextricably intertwined, to the point that with some tunes, like "The Red-Haired Boy" (a.k.a. "Little Beggar Man"), no one is quite sure on which side of the Atlantic they were first played.

Along with dance tunes, the Scottish emigrants brought centuries of songs and ballads—the sort of historical, semi-historical, and allegoric memories of home that in the 1880s folklorist Francis James Child collected in his *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. New Scots-Americans made the songs their own, morphing them, switching out place names, and creating variations until "Mattie Groves," "Two Sisters," and "Fennario" were as American as they were Scots.



RADIO DAYS

In the 19th century and up to the First World War, songs were largely passed along around the piano in the parlor, until the advent of radio changed things entirely. Between the wars, Scots songs entered modern America largely as music hall and vaudeville novelties, delivered with consciously stereotypical trappings by singers such as Harry Lauder. And so, for a couple of generations, everybody knew "A Wee Deoch an Doris," "Roamin' in the Gloamin'," "Auld Lang Syne," and little else Scottish. But aside from self-identified Scottish enclaves, American audiences still tended to receive these songs as artifacts of elsewhere rather than making them their own.

Then came the 1960s, when we started singing the songs ourselves—with a vengeance—as American folk singers and musicologists began mining Scots and other British Isles musical traditions. The songs of Scotland's national poet Robert Burns were rediscovered. British archivists Alan Lomax, A.L. Lloyd, and Ewan McColl delivered a treasure trove of ballads that was leapt on by the likes of Pete Seeger and gained rapid traction in the coffeehouses. McColl himself, partnered with Peggy Seeger, began releasing records in 1959, and music fans who didn't frequent coffeehouses began finding Scottish songs in record bins.

Everywhere, the Scottish and American vernacular repertoires remain inextricably intertwined, to the point that with some tunes, like "The Red-Haired Boy," no one is quite sure on which side of the Atlantic they were first played.

The day Scots singer Jean Redpath arrived in New York in 1961 was a true red-letter day in the Scots-American musical renaissance. Redpath possessed both a beautiful voice and a vast repertoire including over 400 traditional songs learned from Edinburgh poet and singer Hamish Henderson. And soon everybody was singing them. Whether or not she is the most influential person in this chapter of our tale makes for a lively discussion, but it's certain that both Bob Dylan and Joan Baez owed a lot to Redpath early on. Young Dylan sang "Lord Randall" and "Parting Glass," and Baez enjoyed early hits with "Silkie" and "Wild Mountain Thyme." Happily, Redpath remained on the folk scene for more than another 50 years, teaching, lecturing at universities in both the USA and Scotland, and singing all over before her death in 2014.

America's appetite for traditional ballads seemed insatiable in the '60s. More British Isles singers began touring the States. Songbooks abounded. Radio and television spread the songs far and wide, though they still tended to be performed in a style perceived by Americans as folky. Observant musicians on both sides of the Atlantic began noticing how closely linked American and Scottish ballads were. What happened next scattered Scottish songs and songwriters in many directions.

DISSOLVING BOUNDARIES

Beginning in the late '60s, every kind of popular music got turned on its head, and

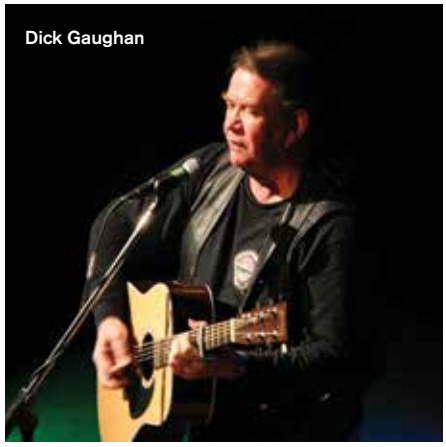
Scottish music was no exception. Whatever had once separated genres—folk, rock, blues, jazz, soul, Celtic, Latin, classical, and all the rest—simply dissolved. While the pure acoustic folk scene continued to flourish, some bands opted to go electric and got louder, and some began to perform their songs in daring new ways and configurations. Suddenly there was no single way to define the music being written and performed by Scots in the '60s and '70s.


Dougie MacLean

In one singular development, the realization struck that highland bagpipes were really rock'n'roll instruments. So came the first Scots folk-rock bands, with rock instruments tossed in with fiddles, flutes, and, most important, singers cranked up to match the pipes' intensity. Traditional Scots pipe tradition and singing tradition, sharply separate for centuries, suddenly came crashing together. Roy Gullane's Tannahill Weavers and Brian McNeill and Alan Reid's Battlefield Band were among the folk bands who graduated to larger, more eclectic venues and festivals, capturing new audiences and inviting more to follow. And in the States, bands not perceived by their audiences as Scottish in any way, like the Grateful Dead, took ballads including "Lady of Carlisle" and "Fennario," rearranged them, mashed them up with other musical influences, and added them back into the mix.

It's only fair to note here that the Scottish folk invasion paralleled a similar inundation from Ireland, which deserves its own story. But their combined effect on the American folk music scene was unprecedented. By the late '70s, practically every American city had spawned Celtic folk and rock bands, often cavalierly discarding distinctions between Scots and Irish. Many bands got started covering the songs and arrangements of Battlefield, Steeleye Span, Planxty, and the rest of the first wave of newly crowned Celtic stars. Every folk festival roster found itself packed with Scots and Irish bands and singers.

Apart from the performers, by the 1980s, Scottish song—whether sung by Scots or non-Scots—was everywhere in the American folk repertoire. Dick Gaughan's "Handful of Earth," "Witch of the West-Mer-lands" by Archie Fisher, and Burns' "Parcel of Rogues in a Nation" and "Ye Banks and Braes" were in heavy folk-club rotation. And helping to introduce a new generation of singers and fans to the music was a young radio host, Fiona Ritchie, who in 1981 launched her *Thistle and Shamrock* radio show on WFAE Charlotte in North Carolina, syndicating it nationally in 1983. For Ritchie, Scottish songs were to be sung, shared, and repurposed in any way one chose. She promoted both UK and American performers, encouraging modern Celtic songwriters as well as interpreters of the oldest traditions. Her program continues to inspire and surprise today.


Dick Gaughan

MARKUS GROßMANN

SCOTTISH-AMERICAN SONG TODAY

But what of the old Scottish songs that are still widely sung? And what of the new songs born in Scotland, informed by the past but expressing current issues and attitudes? What connects them? Brian McNeill summed it up well at Montgomery College's Frank Islam Athenaeum Symposia speaker series in 2015: "The importance of Scottish music is the same as the importance of all traditional music. It reminds us who we are. It reminds us what our roots are. It reminds us of the important things in life, because traditional music was never written about casual things. The songs are about protest, about working conditions, about the big absolutes like love and money and jobs and emigration. Sometimes very serious, sometimes a great deal of fun."


Battlefield Band

MICHAEL LUCAN

The last couple of generations of Scottish songwriters have brought forth a good number of writers and singers whose work reflects all these ideas—and in many different styles. Indeed, one could make a case that the last 40 years have been as musically productive a time as any similar period of history (save, perhaps, Burns' lifetime). Just counting Dougie MacLean, Brian McNeill, Dick Gaughan, Robin Williamson, and Jim Malcolm, we have hundreds of songs covering every mood from serious to fun. And then there are the love notes to Scotland—snapshots of happy moments. A good example of these is Brian McNeill's "Lads of the Fair," which is now so ubiquitous that it's considered as legitimately traditional as any Burns song. And while "So Will We Yet" has been sung by happy revelers for centuries, Dougie MacLean's "Caledonia" is the sort of singalong anthem that only comes around once in a generation.

One thing that is particularly true about Scottish song is that it has always acknowledged our place in the wider scope of history. There's a strong vein of antiwar sentiment found as readily in 18th century songs as those written yesterday. You get "Will Ye Go to Flanders," starting off romanticizing the army, only to drive home that the soldiers will die . . . and for what? Then you get McNeill's "No Gods and Precious Few Heroes," which lets loose raw anger in condemning the rich men who keep sending the poor to war.

There's timeless truth in the Scottish songbook. The love and longing that sparked a ballad in Burns' time is no different than today's. Oppression then was no different than oppression now. And hope springs eternal. What better way to sum up than by singing with gentle confidence, "And friends we'll stay whatever way blind fortune turns the wheel." **AG**

Tae the Weavers Gin Ye Gang

Here's how to play a cornerstone of the Scottish repertoire

BY DANNY CARNAHAN


Robert Burns

No stranger to rural romantic intrigue, the great Robert Burns wrote "Tae the Weavers Gin Ye Gang" in 1788. It's a tale as old as time—further confirmation both that one need not be rich to win a heart and that following one's bliss carries consequences. The setting is a mashup of all the versions I've heard over the years, from those by Andy M. Stewart to the Tannahill Weavers, and back to the grey mists of memory floating up from my Renaissance Faire days.

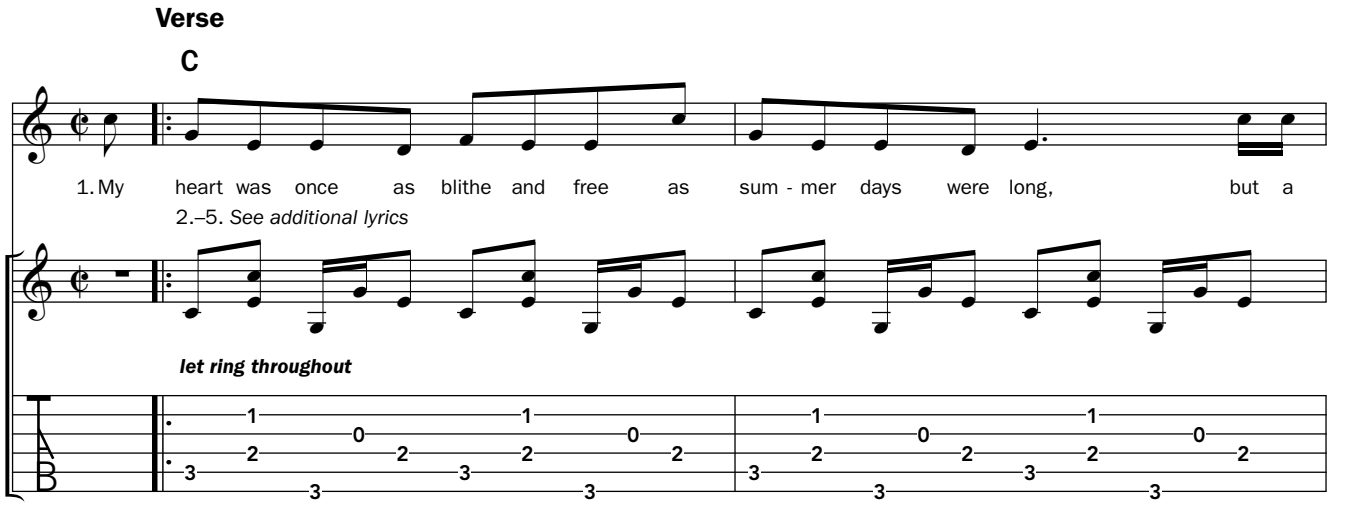
I stick with Burns' original broader Scots lyrics as I learned them, rather than an Anglicized interpretation—partly because translating them strips them of so much zing, and partly because they're just so much fun to hear this way. It's nearly impossible to sing this version without smiling.

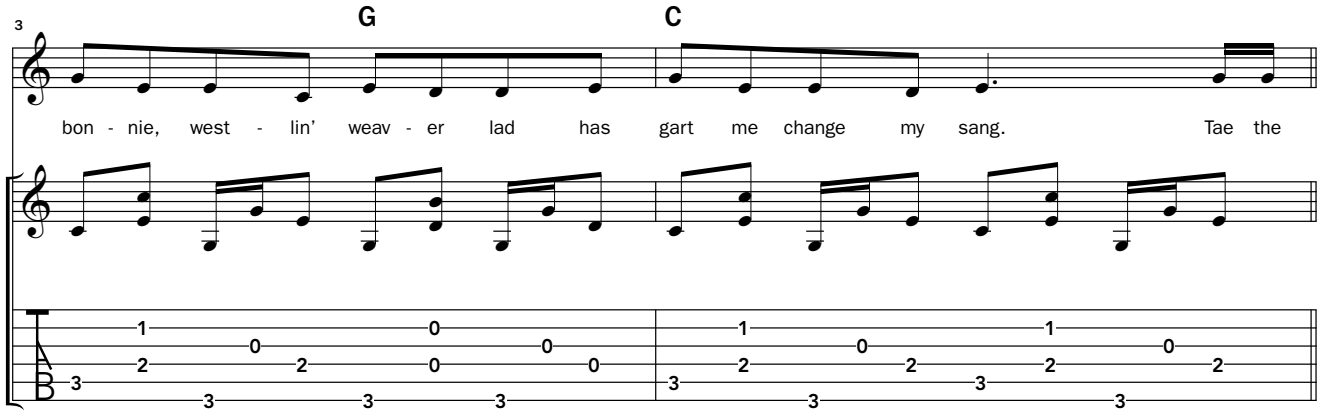
I play the song in the key of C major and keep the chord progression simple. The verse requires only the I and V chords (C and G), while the chorus dips into the relative minor, adding the darker vi and iii chords (Am and Em) before a final short, bright G that propels you into the next verse. Keep the thumb pulse strong and even, and let your notes ring as long as you can before switching chord shapes. On the C chord, move your third finger between the third-fret C on string 5 and the third-fret G on string 6. You'll find there's no need to hurry.

The picking pattern is a straightforward alternating bass that should be easy enough for anyone acquainted with the Travis style. Just remember to pick the bottom three strings with your thumb or a thumbpick and the higher strings with your index, middle, and ring fingers. Keep it rolling along jauntily—and keep smiling. AG

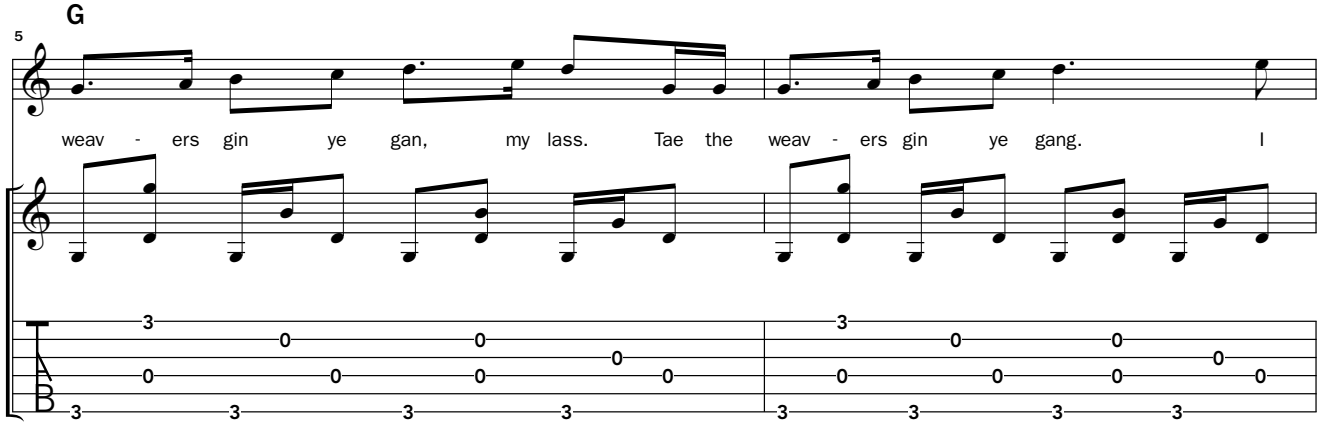
TAE THE WEAVERS GIN YE GANG

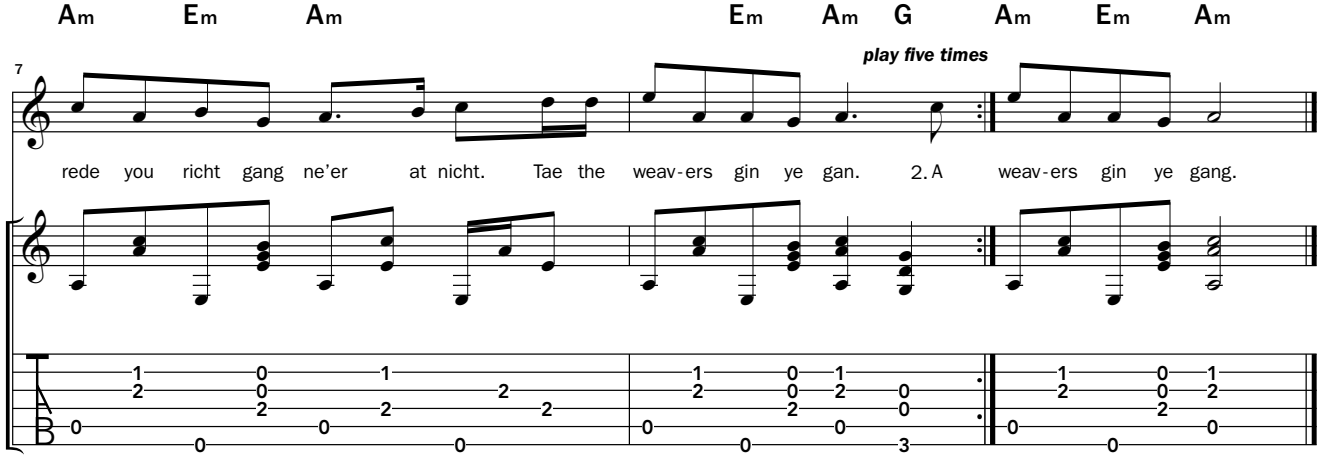
TRADITIONAL, ARRANGED BY DANNY CARNAHAN





Chorus





2. A bonnie westlin' weaver lad sat working at his loom
He took my heart as wi' a net in every knot and thrum

3. I sat beside my warpin' wheel, and aye I called it roun'
But every shot and every knock my heart it gae a stoun

4. The moon was sinking in the west, wi' visage pale and wan
As my bonnie westlin' weaver lad conveyed me through the glen

5. But what was said, or what was done, shame fa' me gin I tell
But, oh! I fear the kintra soon will ken as weel's mysel'

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Acoustic Guitar in This Cool Century

45 albums from the 2000s you should hear

BY BLAIR JACKSON

This idea might surprise you: We are in a new Golden Age of Acoustic Guitar. Never have there been so many true virtuoso players, working in so many different styles, expanding the possibilities of the instrument with their seemingly boundless imaginations. And as listeners and fans, we have never had access to this much music, old and new. Virtually the entire history of recording is literally at our fingertips through our phones and computers. Want to compare Joni Mitchell's early records with her later work? Want to hear 1920s recordings of Blind Blake, or the quirky folk of England's Incredible String Band from the late '60s? Where should you start if you want to understand all this fuss about Tommy Emmanuel? What's the story with Michael Hedges? Just start streaming; maybe you'll find that magical album. At the very least, the search will be interesting and enlightening.

It recently occurred to us that in these fractured and hyper times, when we are deluged with so much information from everywhere, and it is so difficult to keep up with *anything* before the next shiny object appears to distract us, many *AG* readers might not be aware of a lot of the fantastic acoustic-guitar-driven albums that have come out in the new millennium. Well, we're here to help! We asked some of our regular writers to give us lists of their favorite acoustic-guitar-dominated recordings that came out between 2000 and 2017, and then opened the topic to you, our readers, and were greeted by a blizzard of responses—more than 1,500 total choices.

This was not, strictly speaking, a poll, in which the albums that got the most "votes" would constitute our Top 25 (or the ten honorable mentions). Otherwise, you'd probably have four by Tommy Emmanuel on here, and three by Julian Lage. Instead, our goal was to show the range of the great acoustic-guitar music that's been made so far in this century. So we limited the picks to one album per artist (sneaking in a couple of other mentions when we felt like it) and tried to broaden the list to reflect not just the virtuosos—you'll find plenty here—but also some of the talented guitar-playing singer-songwriters who turned up repeatedly in the survey, as well. Our picks are listed in chronological order by album release. You'll no doubt be mystified by some choices, possibly angered by others—or by the omissions this sort of list inevitably engenders: "I can't believe you didn't include ___!" Honest, we're not trying to make you mad. We simply want to turn you on to some great music you might not have heard—most of which you can access through Spotify and/or Apple Music (and no doubt other streaming services).

Alas, you will not find any classical-guitar picks here (such a list might make its way into our sister publication *Classical Guitar*), nor is there any Hawaiian music, or much world music in general (save for albums by Corey Harris and Habib Koité). Maybe another time. However, you will find an additional listing of ten particularly notable archival/historical albums and boxes that have come out since 2000.

Happy listening!



Various Artists

'O Brother, Where Art Thou?' Soundtrack

(Lost Highway) 2000

A true phenomenon of recent music history, this old-time music soundtrack for the Coen Brothers' quirky and fun film sold more than 8 million copies and won Album of the Year at the Grammys (as well as other honors). The soundtrack was put together by T Bone Burnett and features a stellar cast of pickers and singers, including Norman Blake, Alison Krauss, Dan Tyminski, Emmylou Harris, the Peasall Sisters, Gillian Welch, Ralph Stanley, and many more. Look for the "10th Anniversary Edition," which includes a bonus disc with 14 added tracks.



Laurence Juber

LJ Plays the Beatles

(Solid Air) 2000

Juber took up the guitar after hearing the Beatles in 1964, and later spent three years in Paul McCartney's Wings. So who better to render Beatles songs in wondrous solo acoustic arrangements? Not only is Juber an exceptional player, he is a spectacularly gifted arranger, adept at simultaneously playing melody, bass lines, and clever ornamentation to make his versions of Beatles classics sound both faithful and new. What he does here with "Strawberry Fields," "Things We Said Today," and "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" is magical. *Vol. 2* (2010) and *LJ Can't Stop Playing the Beatles* (2017) are also sensational.



Pierre Bensusan

Intuite

(Favored Nations) 2001

This solo guitar album by the French-Algerian DADGAD specialist covers many different styles and moods—from cool, jazzy numbers to plunges into Middle Eastern, Spanish, and old English music. Bensusan is one of the most fluid players you'll ever hear, and he has a wide range of ornaments and "effects" (like making his guitar sound like an oud at one point) at his disposal, but he parses them out judiciously. Check out his fantasia on "Scarborough Fair" (dedicated to John Renbourn), and his lovely tribute to Michael Hedges. His 2013 live, career-spanning 3-CD retrospective *Encore* also received several votes.



Alison Krauss & Union Station

New Favorite

(Rounder) 2001

Singer/fiddler Alison Krauss is the marquee name, but guitar fans also love this band because of Dan Tyminski and dobro titan Jerry Douglas (along with banjo ace and sometime guitarist Ron Block). A bluegrass vibe shines through this nicely presented recording, though it sounds less traditional than earlier Krauss outings. Still, the playing is magnificent and covers much ground, from the dobro-banjo throwdown "Choctaw Hayride" to the seamless country pop of "The Lucky One" to the affecting Gillian Welch/David Rawlings title track that ends the album. The 2003 2-CD *Live* contains nearly all these songs and more.



Kelly Joe Phelps

Sky Like a Broken Clock

(Rykodisc) 2001

AG readers listed a few different Phelps albums and this one captures his gritty essence as well as any of them. He has that touch of sandpaper in his voice, and a bluesy, rough-hewn intensity in both his fingerpicking (on acoustic, and resonator on "Beggar's Oil") and his songwriting, which runs from vivid portraits of various common-folk characters to gut-wrenching personal musings. The tasteful bare-bones instrumentation matches the dark hues of Phelps' engaging story-songs perfectly.



Jorma Kaukonen

Blue Country Heart

(Columbia) 2002

Because of Hot Tuna, most people think of Jorma as a supreme blues picker, and certainly there is blues running all through this brilliant, Grammy-nominated collection. But it leans more country (as the title implies), with most tunes dating back to the '20s and '30s, popularized originally by the likes of the Delmore Brothers, Jimmie Rodgers, and others. Jorma gets plenty of chances to shine, but this is truly an ensemble album with an A-list band: Sam Bush (mandolin), Jerry Douglas (dobro), Byron House (bass), and Béla Fleck (banjo on a few cuts).



Corey Harris

Mississippi to Mali

(Rounder), 2003

In an exciting meeting of two distant but related musical cultures, American bluesman Corey Harris is joined by the late, great Malian guitarist/singer Ali Farka Touré (d. 2006) who, ten years earlier, cut the groundbreaking *Talking Timbuktu* with Ry Cooder. This one is a seamless exploration of the nexus between African folk and Delta blues consisting of just guitars, varied percussion, and the occasional flute or fiddle (played by Touré). There are traditional blues, African tunes, and a couple in French. The recording has a live, intimate, you-are-there quality to it and the music feels wonderfully raw and spontaneous.



Bryan Sutton

Bluegrass Guitar

(Sugar Hill) 2003

Flatpicking guitar master and accompanist supreme Bryan Sutton has played with just about everybody who's anybody in country and bluegrass, winning scads of awards along the way. He's also made a number of albums himself, like this flawless disc of instrumentals played by a red-hot lineup including Tim O'Brien (mandolin), David Talbot (guitar, mandolin), Tim Crouch (fiddle), and Dennis Crouch (bass). The solos are fairly traded around, but Sutton definitely gets plenty of chances to show his stuff. Most of the songs are traditional reels and uptempo kickers, but there are also a couple of affecting ballads.



Pat Metheny

One Quiet Night

(Warner Bros.) 2003

Another top vote-getter, this solo acoustic album marked quite a departure for Metheny, one of the great collaborators in modern jazz. This time out it's just him and a Manzer baritone acoustic, and the material definitely leans more toward folk spaces than jazz. Still, it swings on his cover of Jesse Harris' "Don't Know Why" (a hit for Norah Jones); he does a nice job with Keith Jarrett's "My Song"; and the album hit #1 on the *Billboard* Jazz chart. Even so, it won a Grammy for Best New Age album, maybe appropriate for this mostly gentle and atmospheric work.



Adrian Legg

Guitar Bones

(Favored Nations) 2003

The prolific British fingerstylist is famous for using unusual guitars, and on this solid album he employs everything from a 19th century–style Brook Creedy parlor guitar to a funky, "thoroughly non-descript" resonator he bought cheap to a sparkling custom job built around an Ovation pickup. So there are lots of timbral shadings and styles, including the slide-driven "The One-Eyed Turk," the jazzy blues "Jam Tomorrow," the fluttering "St. Mary's," and even an extrapolation off of "Auld Lang Syne." He claimed this album was "about simplicity"; apparently he just can't help being dazzling.



Rory Block

Last Fair Deal

(Telarc) 2003

For more than 40 years, Rory Block has been putting out albums that dig way, *way* down into the real blues. Today few, if any, can match her when it comes to acoustic slide guitar. This album didn't attract as much attention as her 2007 all–Robert Johnson disc, *The Lady and Mr. Johnson*, but her singing and playing has never been more impassioned, more *feral* than it is here, mostly performing her own heartfelt songs (along with two from Johnson). Her originals are, frankly, more varied than Johnson's, with clouds of gospel and folk drifting through a few songs.



Iron & Wine

Our Endless Numbered Days

(Sub Pop) 2004

"Iron & Wine" is actually one very talented person—singer-songwriter-guitarist Sam Beam, whose solo first album, the DIY *The Creek Drank the Cradle* was something of an indie folk sensation in 2002 (it received several votes, too). This second album features a few other tasteful players but is still dominated by Beam's breathy vocals and fingerpicked acoustic guitars, slide guitar, banjo, and mandolin. His lyrics are occasionally opaque, but songs like "Each Coming Night" and "Love and Some Verses" are so gorgeous and accessible, it's easy to understand why Beam has his considerable following.



Kelley Joe Phelps is a reader-favorite.



Kaki King

Legs to Make Us Longer

(Red Ink) 2004

Kaki King received votes for a few different albums, but since there was no consensus, we've chosen this one because it features some of the percussive tapping approach that wowed so many fans early on. *Legs* also features several pieces with other textures (such as moody electric lap steel, strings, and piano) that point in directions she would follow later, with arrangements that are more complex and more outside musicians. A few also mentioned the "soundtrack" album of her groundbreaking 2015 multimedia show *The Neck Is a Bridge to the Body*, also a compelling work by an artist who loves taking chances.



Tommy Emmanuel

Live One

(Original Works) 2005

Fingerstyle god Tommy Emmanuel's various albums from this century got the most reader votes by far, with *Only* (2000) the most listed of any single album. So why did we choose this live 2-CD set? Because it best shows his incredible versatility, combining many of his best-known songs (including a handful from *Only*) and a bunch of highly original, head-spinning covers, including his great "Beatles Medley," "Classical Gas," Merle Travis' "Guitar Rag," and lovely standards like "Mona Lisa" and "Blue Moon." There's mind-boggling virtuosity *and* exquisitely nuanced balladry. A great album to get to know T.E.!



Rodrigo y Gabriela

Rodrigo y Gabriela
(ATO) 2006

This Mexican duo is a worldwide phenomenon, drawing crowds of all ages with their flashy, fiery blend of Spanish-influenced *nuevo flamenco*, rock, and heavy metal. This album is mostly originals, but includes two notable covers: Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" and Metallica's "Orion." Their highly rhythmic and often percussive style is on full display throughout this album, which is relentless in its drive, with no ballads in sight and just a couple of calm moments—ironically in the two rock covers. This album was one of the most-mentioned in our online poll.



Andy McKee

The Art of Motion
(Candyrat) 2006

Modern fingerstylist Andy McKee is a true YouTube sensation, boasting videos with several *million* views—including one, "Drifting," that is approaching the 57 million mark! That percussive number appears on this superb album along with several others that showcase his rhythmic, Hedges-esque tapping and slapping. But there are also many tracks that show a more delicate, melodic side, such as "When She Cries," "For My Father," and the harp-guitar tune "Into the Ocean." McKee is an unlikely star, but he's definitely got imagination and chops galore.



Bon Iver

For Emma, Forever Ago
(Jagjaguwar) 2007

This haunting indie folk-alternative album got a surprising number of votes. Though guitar is prominent, it's rudimentary, in service of the songs, which are dominated by Justin Vernon's high, ethereal vocals. Vernon wrote and recorded this true DIY album (playing all the instruments and doing all of the vocals himself) in an isolated Wisconsin cabin, and it built slowly over the course of a year to become a widespread success. A couple of songs eventually made their way into film and TV soundtracks, and the single of "Skinny Love" was a US and UK hit.



David Rawlings and Gillian Welch

MARK SELIGER



Martin Simpson

Prodigal Son
(Topic) 2007

A stirring mix of traditional English and American ballads, originals by the veteran Brit (including luscious instrumentals), and with a moving version of Randy Newman's "Louisiana 1927" (with Jackson Browne on harmony vocals) thrown in for good measure, *Prodigal Son* won the BBC Radio 2 Folk Best Album award in 2008. It's a deep and tuneful record, with Simpson showing great skill and elegance on acoustic and resonator guitars (and banjo), ably aided by tasteful accordion, strings, and a few other instruments. Simpson has a classic folk voice—resonant and full of character.



Pete Huttlinger

Fingerpicking Wonder: The Music of Stevie Wonder
(Instar) 2009

Huttlinger, who died in 2016, won the National Fingerstyle Championship in 2000, enjoyed a successful career performing with many artists onstage and in the studio, and also recorded ten solo albums showcasing his guitar artistry in styles ranging from country to Celtic to Christmas carols to this one-of-kind exploration of the music of Stevie Wonder. You might expect that sweet ballads like "My Cherie Amour" and "Isn't She Lovely" would translate easily to solo guitar, but what he does with rhythmically and melodically complex numbers such as "Sir Duke," "Living for the City," and "Superstition" is truly astounding.



Gillian Welch

The Harrow & the Harvest
(Acony) 2011

It was a toss-up whether to choose this one or *Time (The Revelator)* from 2001. Every album Welch and her musical partner/foil David Rawlings make is worth hearing. Like the best folk music, this has a timeless quality to it. One song might sound like an Appalachian folk number, another like a stripped-down Patsy Cline ballad ("Dark Turn of Mind"). "The Way It Goes" sounds like mountain music, but its first line is about a drug overdose. Throughout, Rawlings' guitar lines dance around Welch's solid rhythm playing and often somber but soulful vocals, and their harmonies will break your heart.



Milk Carton Kids

The Ash & Clay
(Anti) 2013

Kenneth Pattengale and Joey Ryan constitute one of the most interesting male duos to come along in many years. Their close harmonies are somewhat reminiscent of both Simon & Garfunkel and the Everly Brothers, and their vintage Martin and Gibson guitars blend as beautifully as their voices. Their songwriting also clearly owes a debt to Paul Simon and to early country and folk antecedents. Still, they definitely have their own highly appealing sound, and both are guitarists worth checking out.



Jason Isbell

Southeastern
(Southeastern) 2013

The former member of the rockin' alt-country Drive-By Truckers is thriving as a solo artist, thanks to confessional albums like this one, where he lays his heart on the line in a collection of evocative, obviously personal country songs. Most are anchored by his dependable acoustic picking and strumming, and this particular album has less of a full-band feel than ones spotlighting his band, the 400 Unit; the arrangements are spare and airy, allowing his plaintive singing to carry the songs. Isbell's 2015 album *Something More Than Free* also received votes. At the time of the album's release, *Pitchfork* magazine called it "his most gripping and his most personal album to date."



Richard Thompson

Acoustic Classics
(Beeswing) 2014

It's always a risk for musicians to re-record songs that are ingrained in the public mind through other versions. But leave it to Richard Thompson to pull off that feat on this intimate and engrossing solo acoustic disc, which really lets his passionate vocals, imaginative guitar work on his Lowden, and powerful songwriting shine through. The song choices from his truly vast catalog are impeccable, and include "Wall of Death," "Shoot Out the Lights," "Dimming of the Day," "1952 Vincent Black Lightning," "When the Spell is Broken," "Valerie," and eight more. *Acoustic Classics II* was released in 2017.



Julian Lage

World's Fair
(Modern Lore) 2015

Lage received the second most votes of any artist in our poll (after Tommy Emmanuel), with this and the 2017 *Mount Royal* (with Chris Etheridge) the top choices. Here it's just Lage and a 1939 Martin 000-18 on 12 diverse tunes, ten his own originals. Though Lage can clearly play circles around almost anyone, on this album he's not out to show off his virtuosity (though plenty is still on display). Instead, there are calm and lyrical gems like "Ryland," "Lullaby," and his take on Rogers & Hart's "Where or When," which show how expressive he can be.



Billy Bragg & Joe Henry

Shine A Light: *Field Recordings from the Great American Railroad*
(Cooking Vinyl), 2017

This unique duo collaboration—just voices and vintage guitars—was recorded at various railway stations between Chicago and L.A., and features a wonderful collection of classic train songs, such as "Rock Island Line," "K.C. Moan," "Lonesome Whistle," "In the Pines," "The Midnight Special," "Railroad Bill," and modern tunes like "Gentle on My Mind" and Gordon Lightfoot's "Early Morning Rain." Audible ambient noise (people, trains, etc.) crops up here and there on these live, "on location" recordings, adding to the intimate, you-are-there quality of the project. All in all, it's an amazing slice of Americana; perfect in its imperfection.

HONORABLE MENTION: 10 MORE TO CHECK OUT



Nitty Gritty Dirt Band
Will the Circle Be Unbroken, Vol. 3
(Capitol) 2002



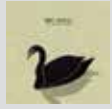
Patti Griffin
1000 Kisses
(ATO) 2002



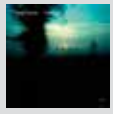
Damien Rice
O
(Vector), 2002



Habib Koité & Bamada
Fôly!
Live Around the World
(World Villa) 2004



Bert Jansch
The Black Swan
(Drag City) 2006



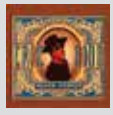
Ralph Towner
Time Line
(ECM), 2006



Biréli Lagrène
Gipsy Project
(Dreyfus) 2009



Tony McManus
The Maker's Mark: The Dream Guitar Sessions
(Alliance) 2009



Eric Bibb
Blues People
(Stony Plain) 2014



Clive Carroll
The Furthest Tree
(self-released) 2016

10 COMPILATIONS AND VINTAGE PERFORMANCE RELEASES WORTH YOUR TIME



Doc Watson

Trouble in Mind: The Doc Watson Country Blues Collection
(Sugar Hill) 2003

Though rightly associated primarily with old-time country, Doc Watson was also a formidable blues singer and guitarist, as this fabulous 17-song compilation proves. Drawing on traditional tunes and songs written or popularized by the likes of Mississippi John Hurt, the Delmore Brothers, Jimmie Rodgers, and the Mississippi Sheiks, Watson appears on this compendium solo (playing guitar, banjo, or harmonica), and also with his son Merle and bassist Eric Weissberg. Two of his best-known songs, "Deep River Blues" and "Little Sadie" are here in strong versions.



Tony Rice

58957: The Bluegrass Guitar Collection
(Rounder) 2003

The title refers to the serial number of the great bluegrass guitarist Clarence White's 1935 Martin D-28, which Rice has owned since the mid-'70s. He does that guitar proud on this extraordinary compilation of 21 old and recent tunes (spanning Bill Monroe to Béla Fleck) featuring Rice alongside such notables as Norman Blake, Doc Watson, Jerry Douglas, David Grisman, J.D. Crowe, Vassar Clements, Stuart Duncan, and so many others. Among the configurations are the Bluegrass Album Band, the Tony Rice Unit, a Rice brothers quartet, and a hot duo with Blake.



Leo Kottke

Instrumentals: The Best of the Capitol Years
(Blue Note) 2003

Leo Kottke is a fine, evocative singer, but there are always going to be fans who like his original guitar instrumentals (6- and 12-string) best. This generous 18-song compilation is for those fans and for anyone who might not know or remember how great Kottke is (and has always been). He is one of the last links to the early days of the "American primitive" guitar movement, and an utterly distinctive stylist capable of dizzying displays of speed and graceful, lilting ballads. Too bad "Watermelon" predates his Capitol years.



Lead Belly at the National Press Club, Washington, DC, 1938

WILLIAM GOTTLIEB



John Fahey

The Best of John Fahey, Vol. 2: 1964–1983
(Takoma) 2004

Though much of this collection comes from after Fahey's supposed peak years, and it includes a number of rare and even unreleased tracks (so how is that a "best of"?), it is still shows the depth and breadth of the pioneering solo guitarist's imagination. Fahey was always a little off-kilter and far away from the mainstream, and so is this cool compendium assembled by guitarist Henry Kaiser.



Neil Young

Live at Massey Hall 1971
(Reprise) 2007

The second archival release from his deep vault, this solo show (acoustic guitar and piano) at a Toronto theater finds Young in the midst of his first wave of mass popularity after the success of Crazy Horse, CSNY, and his smash *Harvest* album. All three of those phases are represented here, but in the solo setting these "hit" songs feel even more like the personal works they all started as, and they are interspersed with less-known songs that are every bit as good as his biggies. It's a warm and inviting album.



Pentangle

The Time Has Come, 1967–73
(Castle Us) 2008

One of the most popular and influential groups of the late 1960s' British folk wave, Pentangle is the eclectic outfit that first brought widespread attention to singular guitarists John Renbourn and Bert Jansch. This 4-CD set has 32 tracks from the group's albums (over two discs), an Albert Hall concert from 1968, and a final disc of TV appearances, B-sides, and other oddities. Pentangle never *quite* broke through in the US, but this box makes a good argument for why they should have.



Various Artists

Imaginational Anthems Vol. 1–3
(Tompkins Square) 2008

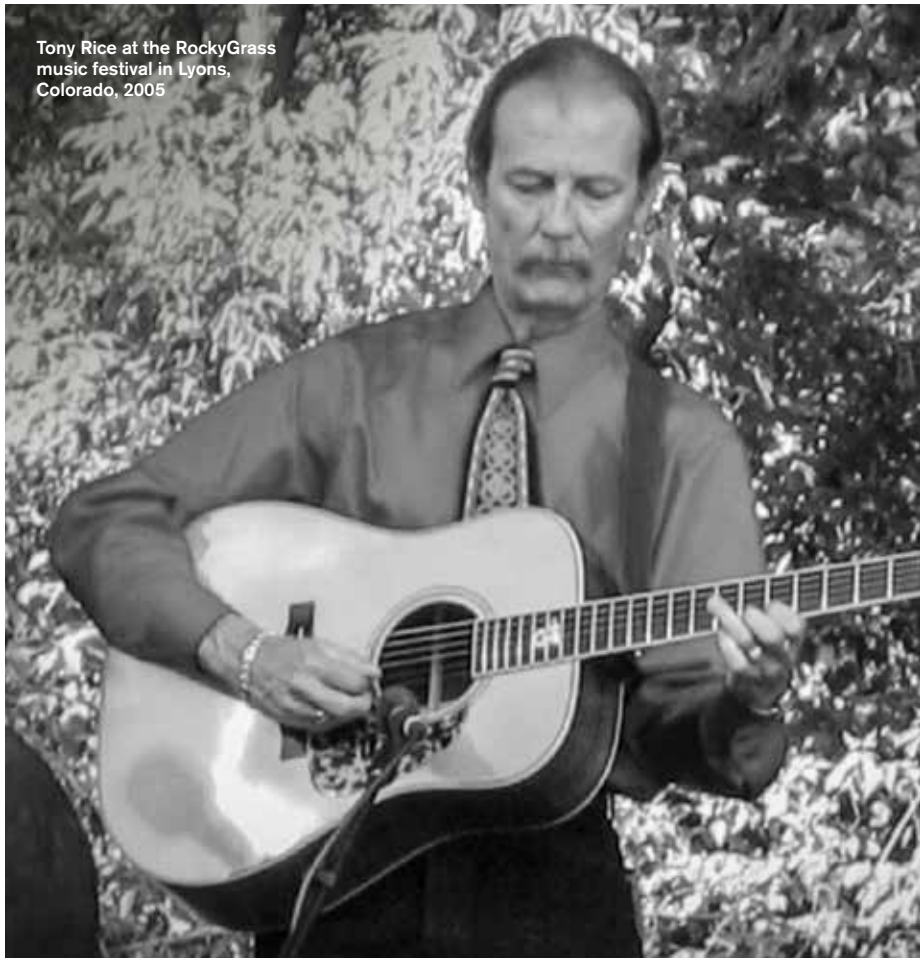
Three CDs trace the modern history of the acoustic guitar as a solo instrument, from early pioneers like John Fahey, Robbie Basho, Henry Taussig, Sandy Bull, and Peter Lang, to some of today's best, such as Kaki King, Nathan Salsburg, and José González. Gyan Riley plays a nice piece with his father, Terry Riley (on piano), and there are colossal 12-string tunes by James Blackshaw, Mark Fosson, and Suni McGrath.



Bob Dylan

The Bootleg Series Vol. 12: The Cutting Edge 1965–66 Deluxe Edition
(Columbia) 2015

A lot of this is electric Dylan, but spread out across the four discs are also many unreleased acoustic guitar takes of songs that ended up on three seminal Dylan albums—*Bringing It All Back Home, Highway 61,* and *Blonde on Blonde*—plus several unreleased tunes. With multiple versions of historic songs, this is like an audio documentary about the moment when folk and rock merged and shook the music world. (Another notable Dylan set is the all-acoustic *The Bootleg Series Vol. 9: The Witmark Demos, 1962–64,* released in 2010.)



Tony Rice at the RockyGrass music festival in Lyons, Colorado, 2005

JORDAN KLEIN



Lead Belly

The Smithsonian Folkways Collection
(Smithsonian/Folkways) 2015

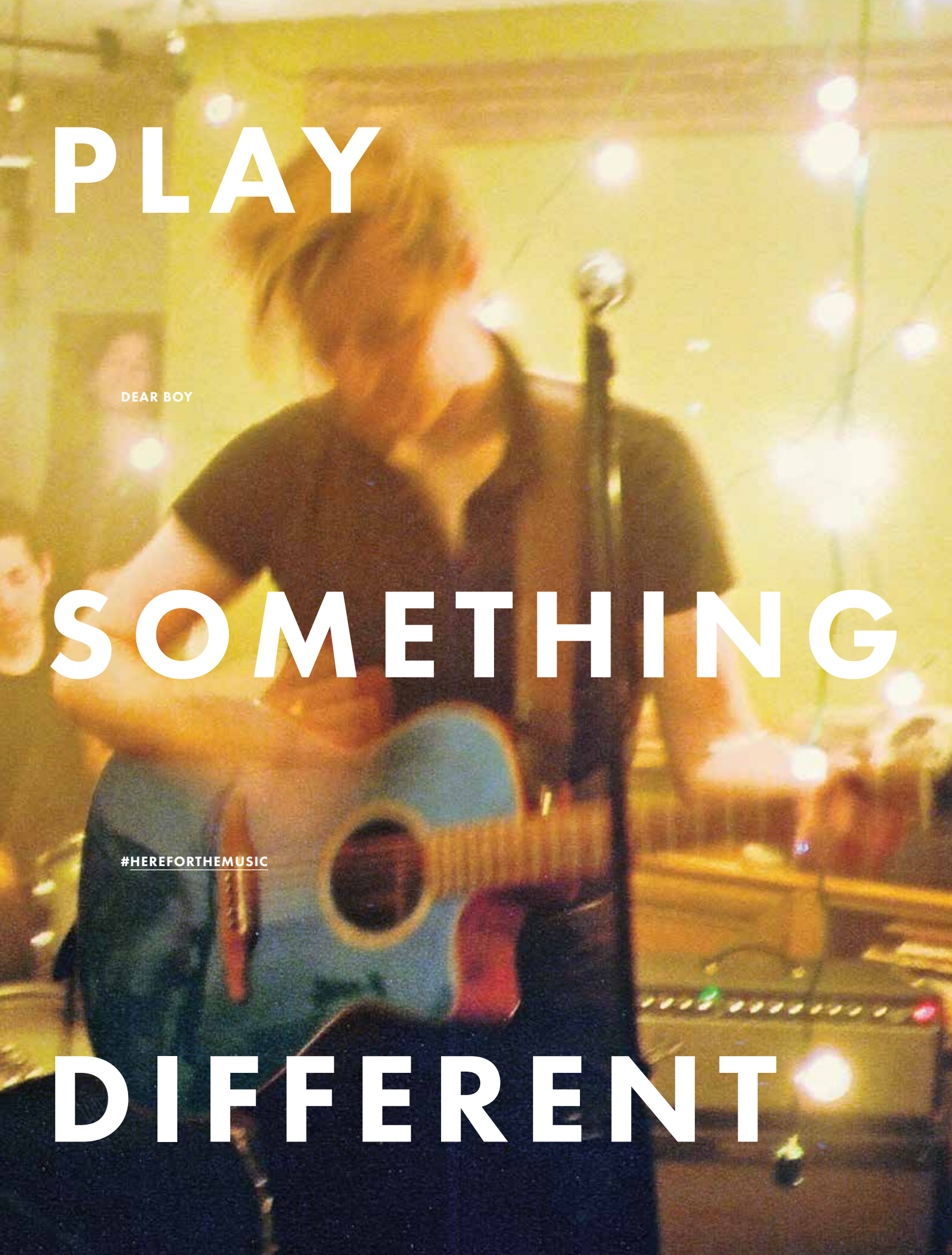
There have been literally dozens of anthologies of Lead Belly recordings released through the years, but this one is just about definitive: The 5-CD set contains 108 tracks from throughout his career, on five CDs, including more than a dozen that were previously unreleased. Lead Belly was a walking archive of old American folk and blues tunes, so there is much to be learned from digesting this massive set and letting his commanding voice and guitar-playing seep into your soul. The hefty accompanying book is filled with photos and essays.



Various Artists

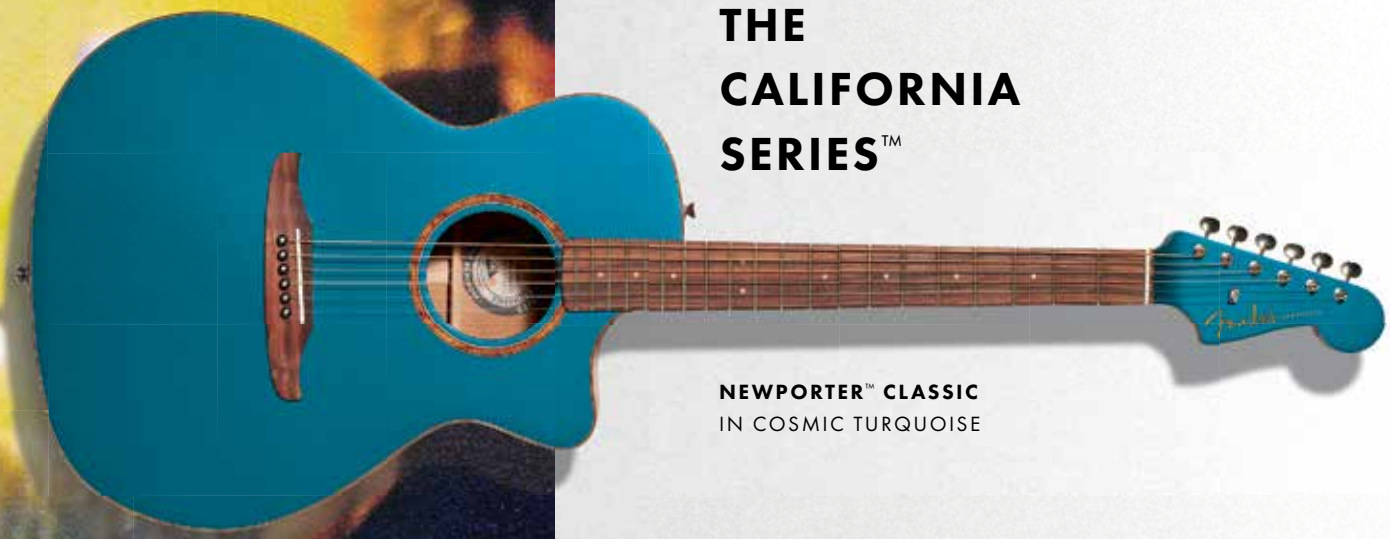
American Epic: The Collection
(Legacy) 2017

This 5-CD box is an incredibly rich, expanded companion "soundtrack" to the outstanding PBS series on American roots music, and contains 100 tracks recorded in the late 1920s and early 1930s, covering blues, old-time country, gospel, Tex-Mex, Hawaiian, and other regional styles from the early days of recording. Many terrific guitarists are represented, including Booker White, Gary Davis, Skip James, Blind Willie Johnson, Maybelle Carter, and Son House. But just as likely you'll be blown away by guitarists you might not know: Mattie Delaney, Roosevelt Graves, Sol Hoʻopiʻi, and more. AG


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Musicians On Call volunteer musicians have performed for over 600,000 patients and their families. The L.A. branch recently celebrated its 5th anniversary with a concert.

HERE'S HOW

The Joy of Sharing

Five ways of passing along music to both individuals and groups

BY DAVID HODGE

Think about your earliest musical memory. Was it your mother singing to you? Was it you singing along with your friends? For me it was my father playing saxophone in wedding bands and dabbling in guitar and banjo. I learned from him that music has the power to move people in many ways. This led me to playing many musical instruments myself. The more instruments I learned, the more I realized how important it is to play with other people and for other people.

Music is meant to be shared, because doing so gives back to everyone involved, listener and performer alike. Here, you'll get some ideas about how to go about sharing music with others. Some will be obvious, others maybe not. But hopefully these tips will inspire you to go out and share your music with the world.

1 GET OUT THERE

Sharing music can have many forms. The most obvious one is performing, but there are lots of ways to do so, some not as apparent as others: You can play at an open-mic night. You can play for your friends at an informal gathering. One can make it a regular event on the social calendar—say, music at so-and-so's house every third Sunday of the month. You can play at retirement homes, nursing homes, or even hospitals. Doug Schmolz, a guitarist based in Berkshire County, Massachusetts, has a weekly gig at the Fairview Hospital in Great Barrington. He makes a circuit around the floor, and there are chairs positioned in the hallway so that he gets a chance to serenade several rooms at once.

You can also cater to kids. Another Berkshire County performer, David Grover, holds court at the Great Barrington Town Gazebo every Saturday morning during the summer, and the place is packed with families. They all love it when he plays "Little Bunny Foo Foo."

When I was just out of college in the early 1980s, my band had an ongoing gig at the Center for Enriched Living, an Illinois institution for young adults with developmental disabilities. They loved having the chance to dance and sing.

Busking is a British term that means to entertain by performing on a street or a public place. Besides being a great way to share music, it can also help you develop your act. One of my former students, Marilyn Miller, busks with her duo in the Hudson, New York, area on a regular basis. She says, "One of my favorite busking memories is when a woman who had been sitting behind us for some time approached us at the end of a song. She said, 'I just want to let you girls know, I felt so down today, but listening to you two just standing there on the street singing lifted my spirits up so wonderfully.'"

2 HOST CONCERTS

Performing isn't limited to musicians. Some people love music but don't play, so they share their space in order to get the music out to others. The relatively recent trend of hosting house concerts is a great example of this.

Canada has a wonderful nonprofit arts organization called Home Routes, formed in 2007 to create a linked group of community-based house concerts all across North America. The

program works by recruiting 12 different host homes in 12 communities, so that performers will have a complete touring circuit. "Home Routes is about meeting mutual needs for the artists and the communities," says the organization's artistic director, Tim Osmond. "It's about developing a vibrant infrastructure for folk music." (www.homeroutes.ca)

3 BECOME A TEACHER

Besides performing, teaching is an excellent way to share music. A teacher not only shares music but shows by example why it's important to do so. The good will one feels when sharing music gives a student more incentive to practice in order to perform. It's a perfect, sustainable cycle.

In addition to private lessons, teaching groups is a great way to share music and to stress the importance of playing with others. It's fun, and having something specific to play in terms of repertoire gives one added incentive to practice.

Tom Serb, director of the Midwest Music Academy in Plainfield, Illinois, says, "Teaching guitar gives me the opportunity to always be exposed to new music. It's a win-win situation: I get new things to listen to and play, and the students get to understand how the musical skills I've been showing them can be used to construct and re-create the music they like."

4 SHARE THROUGH A MUSIC SHOP

A less obvious way of sharing music is through owning or working in a local music shop. By showing and demonstrating an array of musical instruments, a store can introduce customers to different ways that they can express themselves musically. The shop can display many different types of instruments, some of which customers may never have seen or heard—and which they'll be inspired to take up.

A store can also educate customers on the ways that different body styles and tonewoods—as well as strings, picks, and other accessories—impact the way that guitars sound. This can help customers discover the gear best suited to their goals and playing styles—the tools that they will use in sharing music.

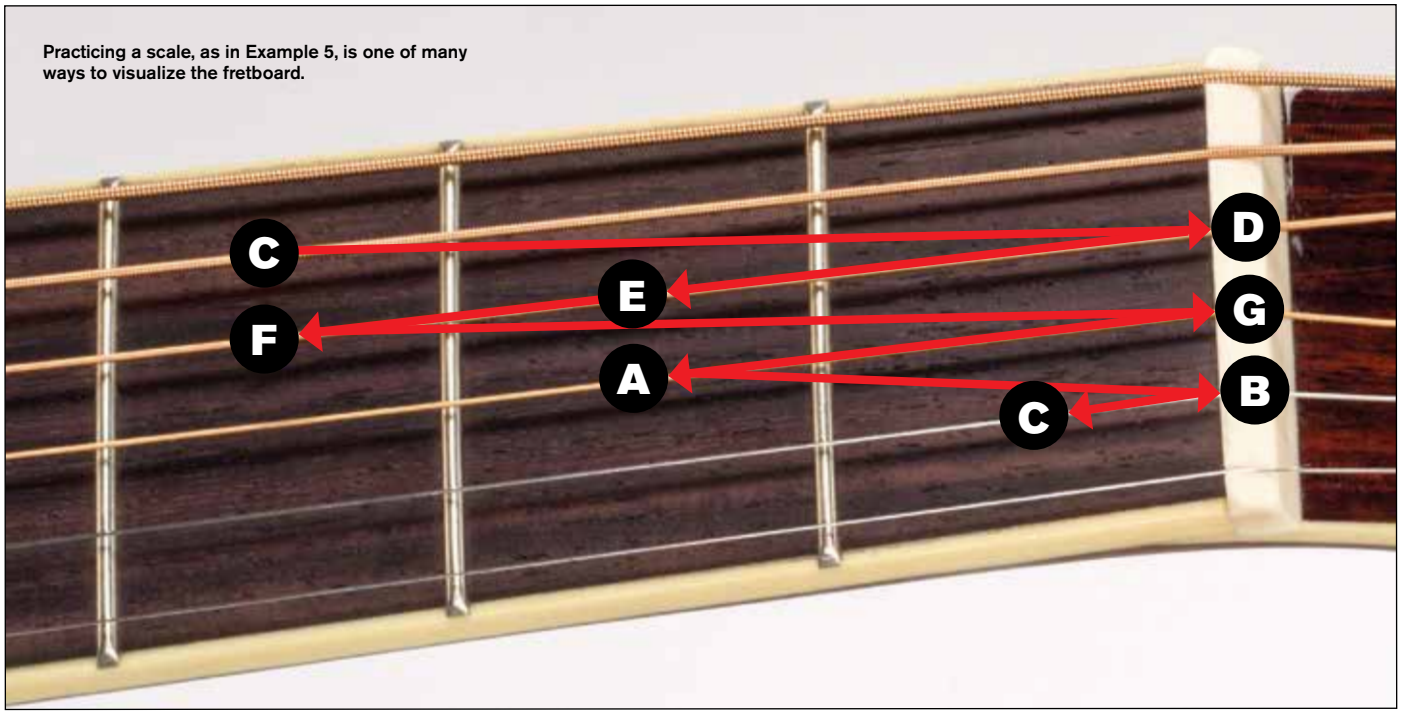
Claudia D'Alessandro, who until recently owned The Music Store in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, puts it this way: "Shop owners, like teachers and other music professionals, share their knowledge and skills so that others can enjoy the making of music as well."

5 PASS THE MUSIC ALONG

One can also share music by going out to hear others perform—a habit that is at the heart of keeping local music alive. One also shares music by making suggestions. How many times have your friends—either by an old-fashioned mix tape or a Spotify playlist—turned you on to an artist that you might not have found on your own?

A bit of warning: sharing music is highly addictive. You're bound to find yourself being challenged to come up with more and more ways to do so. And you'll also discover that sharing is one of the most rewarding things you can do, musically speaking. Imagine one day hearing an accomplished musician say that *you* were the inspiration behind their taking up guitar in the first place. AG





Practicing a scale, as in Example 5, is one of many ways to visualize the fretboard.

Picture This

Getting to know your fretboard with visualization techniques

BY RON JACKSON

THE PROBLEM

Your knowledge of the fretboard is weak and you'd like to correct this.

THE SOLUTION

Become well acquainted with the notes by viewing the fretboard through a handful of different vertical and horizontal perspectives.

1 SEE THE SAME NOTE IN DIFFERENT PLACES

A good way of really getting to know each string is to see where its note is repeated. This concept is demonstrated in **Example 1**, which shows the four locations of the same notes found on the open top strings, the three locations of the open D note, and two of the open A. You might have noticed the omission of the low open E; that's because there's only one instance of it on a guitar in standard tuning. Try this same exercise with other random notes on the neck.

2 CONNECT THE DOTS

Fret markers—those inlays on the fretboard, paired with dots on the side or binding, usually at frets 3, 5, 7, 9, 12, 15, and 17—are very useful for finding where you are on the fretboard. Play the notes at these frets on each string, as shown in **Example 2**. Continue the pattern to strings 5 and 6. (In standard tuning, the notes on string 6 are of course the same as those on string 1.) Be sure to say the name of each note as you play it.

Next, connect these dots by playing all of the notes on each string up to the 12th fret—see **Example 3**—again, saying the name of each note. If you'd like, venture past the 12th fret. Just remember that the notes repeat themselves. Take, for instance, an open E string. The 12th fret is also E, frets 1 and 13 are F, frets 2 and 14 are F♯, and so on.

3 MOVE SOME CHORDS AROUND

You probably already know that certain chords are moveable—that is, a single shape can be used to generate the same chord type on any root note. Moving chords around is another good way to get to know the fretboard. For example, as depicted in bar 1 of **Example 4**, take an open-A chord, move the shape up one fret for a B♭ chord, one more fret for a B chord, and so on. Continue the pattern up and down the fretboard, naming each chord as you play it, and do the same with an E chord, as shown in bar 2. Try this exercise with other chord types and shapes as well.

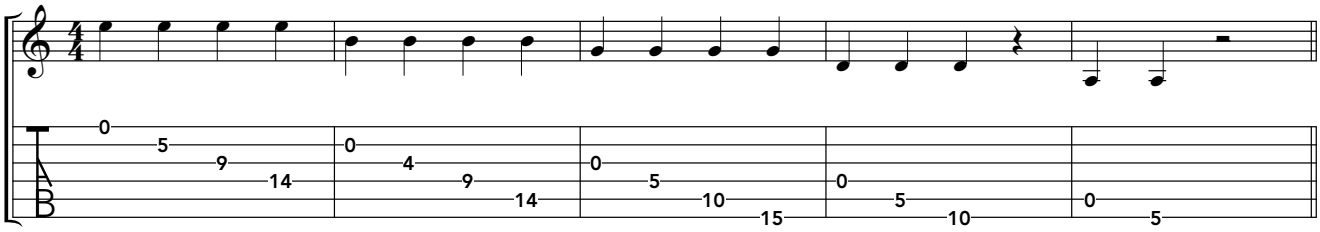
4 WORK ON SCALAR PATTERNS

Practicing scales is yet another way to get well acquainted with the fretboard. Scales tend to be played across the fretboard, rather than up and down it, and therefore by practicing scales you're working on a different approach to visualizing the fretboard. For instance, the first two bars of **Example 5** show the C major scale in one octave, and the second two bars contain a D♭ major scale. As with the other exercises, try extending this example to other scale types and fingerings, too.

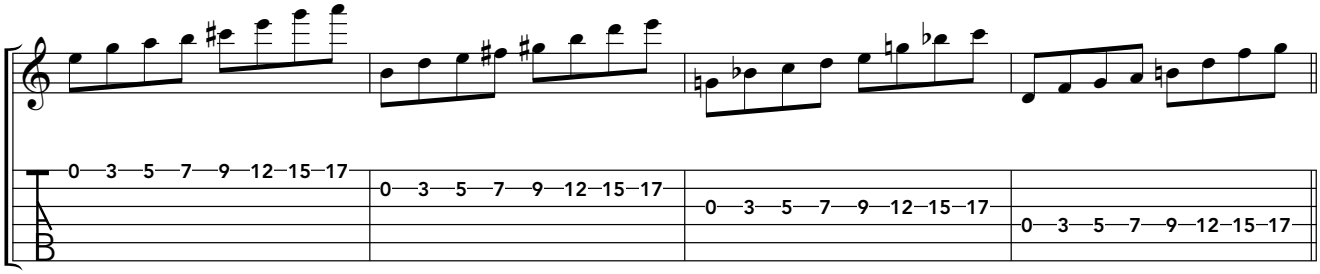
After working through this lesson's exercises, take melodies and chord progressions that you already know and try playing them in different positions. You'll start to see common patterns, and after a bit of practice you'll know the fretboard without even thinking about it.

Ron Jackson is a New York City–based master jazz guitarist, composer, arranger, producer, and educator who's played with Taj Mahal, Jimmy McGriff, Randy Weston, Ron Carter, and many others. practicejazzguitar.com.

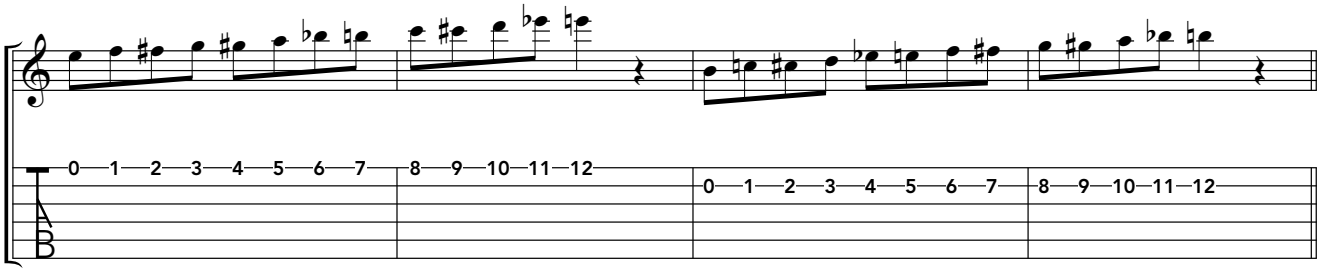
Example 1



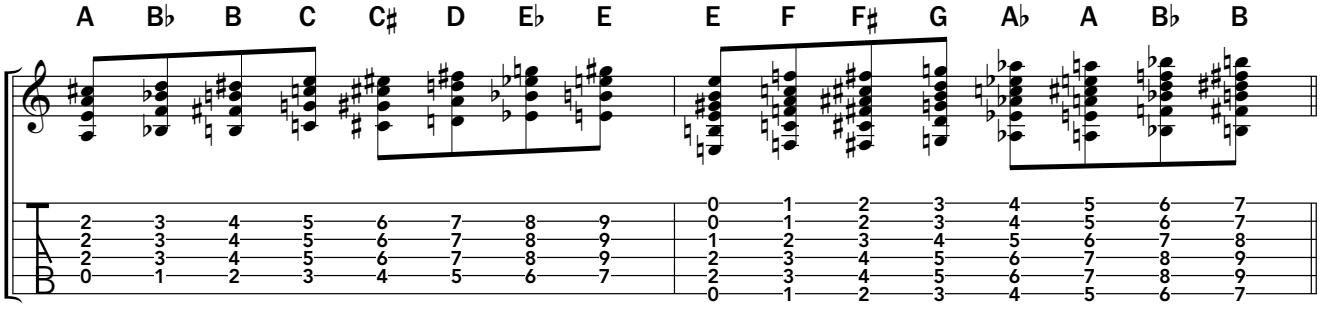
Example 2



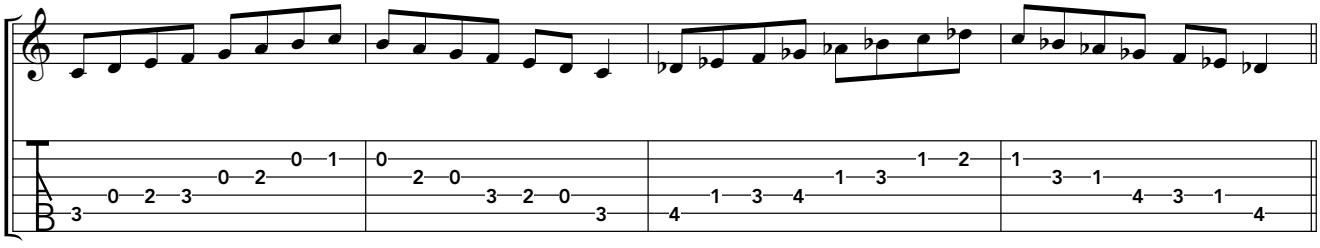
Example 3



Example 4



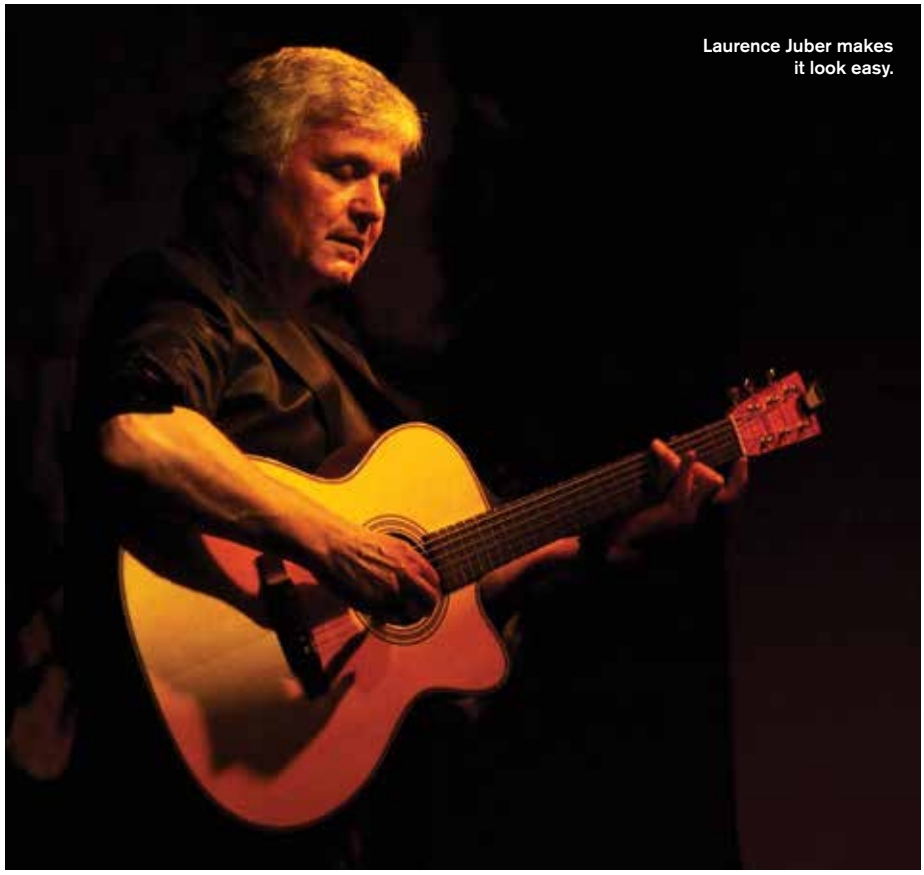
Example 5



Solo Flights

Cultivating your standalone guitar skills

BY ADAM LEVY



Laurence Juber makes it look easy.

NANCY CLENDANIEL

The acoustic guitar really is a remarkable instrument. In the most capable hands, it can sound as rich and dynamic as a grand piano—though it's considerably more portable. True, it's most often used to accompany a singer or to play a lead line, yet there have always been exceptional guitarists who've devised ways to play melodies and accompaniment parts at the same time. The best of the best—players such as Tommy Emmanuel and Laurence Juber—make it look just easy enough to make you think, "Hey, I wanna do that!" If you've ever tried to compose or arrange music for solo guitar, however, you know it's no simple task. But, like anything else on the instrument, it's achievable with a little guidance and some hours of dedicated practice.

In this month's Weekly Workout, you'll learn a few fundamental solo-guitar concepts that will get you started and leave you with enough tools to continue developing at your own pace. If you don't already own a metronome (or metronome app), make sure to get one ASAP. Practicing *in time* is one of the most important steps toward building a strong solo-guitar style.

One final caveat: While lots of solo-guitar music is composed and played in alternate tunings, the examples in this Weekly Workout lesson are all in standard, to ensure that these concepts are accessible to all players. That said, much of what you'll learn here is transferrable to a variety of tunings.

WEEK ONE

As you begin to explore the guitar as a solo instrument, keep in mind that there's no need to reinvent the wheel here. Composers have been penning solo-guitar music for centuries, so there's plenty of literature to draw inspiration from. Francisco Tárrega (1852–1909) and Fernando Sor (1778–1839) are two of the most renowned composers for the instrument—and they were virtuoso guitar players as well.

Though both Tárrega and Sor wrote elaborate works, they also penned simpler etudes, accessible to players at beginning to intermediate levels. Both took full advantage of the guitar's tuning and fretboard layout to achieve beautiful effects that don't require knuckle-busting technique. You should get a few such pieces under your belt and learn from these masters.

Example 1 is an excerpt from the Sor study Op. 60, No. 8, in the key of C major. You needn't strictly follow classical-guitar protocols as you play this. Minding a couple of conventions regarding picking-hand fingers, however, may be helpful: Notes on strings 4–6 are nearly always played with the thumb; notes on strings 1–3 are nearly always played with the ring, middle, and index fingers, respectively. (The last measure illustrates an exception to this, as the open G is to be played with the thumb.)

Example 2 comes from Tárrega's lovely "Adelita," in E minor. As with the previous example, this piece lays nicely on the instrument in its original key—and wouldn't make nearly as much guitaristic sense in any other key. (Note Tárrega's employment of the open fifth and sixth strings as bass notes in bars 1 and 2, as well as the open first and second strings in the arpeggio in bar 4). Sustain a full barre at the seventh fret throughout bar 3.

WEEK TWO

Jazz can provide wonderful opportunities for solo-guitar arrangements, because the genre offers so much harmonic leeway. Standards, or old familiar songs, can be completely reimagined using fresh sounds from a player's chordal vocabulary. Many venerated solo guitarists—including Lenny Breau and Ted Greene—built their reputations largely on inventive voicings. Still, as any serious jazzbo knows, a little goes a long way when it comes to hip five- and six-note voicings—because such grips can be cumbersome to play and tiring on the ears if overused.

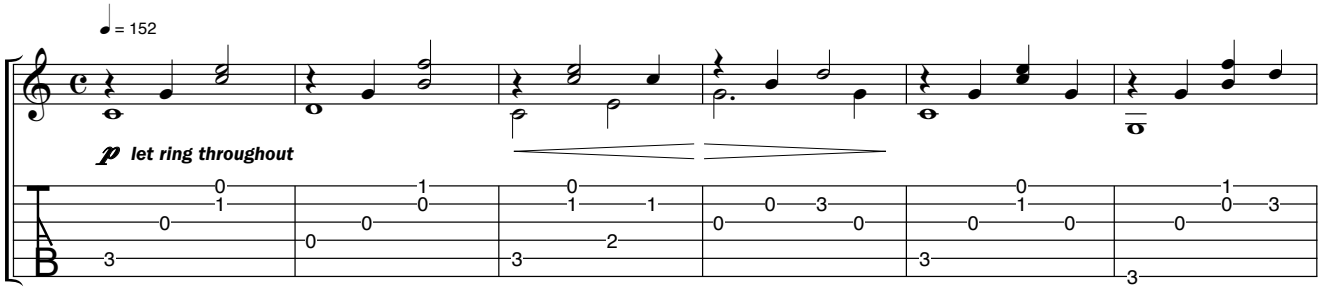
Example 3a is based on the first eight bars of the jazz evergreen "All the Things You Are." The harmonization choices here are on the lush side. Once you've played Ex. 3a several

Beginners' Tip #1

Playing fingerstyle (as opposed to flatpicking) may be the most effective technique for solo guitar. If you're new to fingerstyle playing and want to fortify your chops, Mauro Giuliani's classic *120 Studies for Right Hand Development* is a great primer.

WEEK 1

Example 1

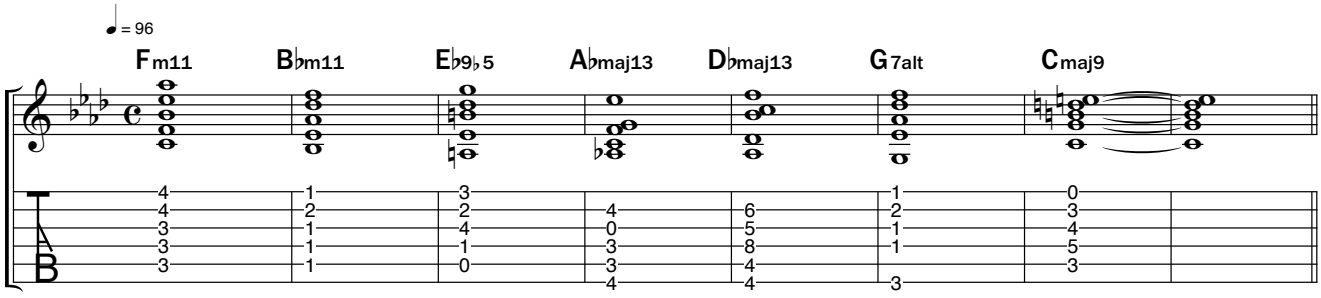


Example 2

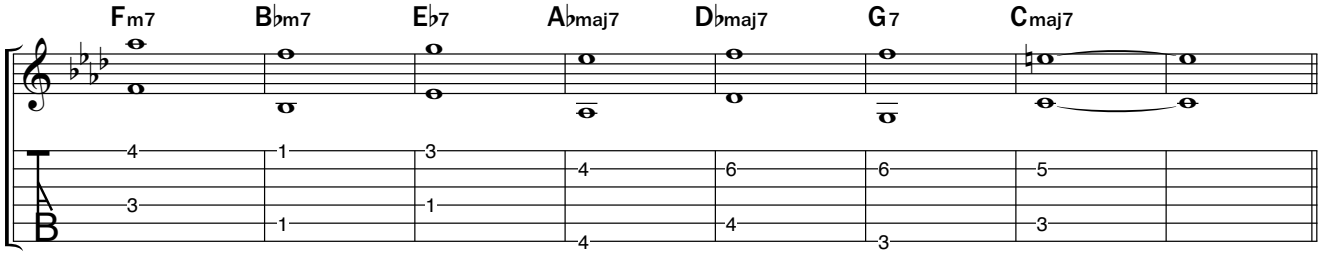


WEEK 2

Example 3a



Example 3b



times and can smoothly move from chord to chord, try **Example 3b**—a barebones harmonization of the same melody. There aren't even complete seventh-chord voicings here—just a skeletal version of the original melody (the top line from Example 3a) supported by the root note of each chord. Example 3b may look austere on the printed page, but this two-voice melody-over-root approach can be very effectual—and not just for jazz. Try it with one of your favorite melodies, in any style.

If your ears are hankering for some richer sounds, play **Example 3c,** which splits the difference between Ex. 3a and 3b. Now you've got the melody note, the root, and either the third or seventh of the chord—whichever is missing. For example, in bar 1, an E♭ is added. It's the seventh of Fm7—chosen because the original melody note, A♭, is the third of that chord. In bar 2, a D♭ is added to B♭m7. Here, the melody note is the fifth of the chord, so you could fill things out with A♭ (the seventh) or D♭ (third). Either choice would work, but D♭ makes the most sense when you look at the whole progression. It keeps the middle voice on a more even trajectory, bar by bar.

WEEK THREE

In this week's lesson, you'll focus the basics of Merle Travis–style fingerpicking in all five open-position major keys (C, A, G, E, and D). (For more on Travis picking see Jamie Stillway's lesson in the December 2017 issue of *AG*.) Travis—in case you don't happen to know—was a popular singer, songwriter, and guitarist, active from the 1940s until his death in 1983. Today, he's best known for his namesake syncopated picking approach, which he himself played with just two digits—his thumb (equipped with a plastic thumbpick) and index finger. Some guitarists find it easier to play Travis style with a bare thumb (no thumbpick) and two fingers (index and middle). Whichever technique works for you is fine, so long as you play with some *oomph*.

Before tackling these patterns, take a moment to consider *why* these five keys are particularly effective for solo-guitar arrangements. It's because at least three open strings are native to each key. The open strings can be used to sustain notes in low, middle, and high registers, lending the guitar a more pianistic quality. Such effects are possible in other keys, but they fit most naturally in the five mentioned above. C, A, G, E, and D are especially utile for solo guitar, so you'll be practicing two picking patterns based on these chords.

Example 4a shows one common Travis-style picking pattern. The thumb's job is to play steady quarter notes—either alternating between the root and a higher chord tone (perhaps root-3-root-3) or else playing the root, then a higher chord tone, then a fifth below the root, and finally back to the higher tone (root-3-5-3, for example). While the bass line is maintained with the thumb, the index and middle fingers usually play melodies in syncopated rhythms offset from the bass line. When you first practice Travis-style patterns, it's best to play repetitive melodic figures featuring just a couple of notes. As you grow more adept at this style, you'll find that you can modify these generic patterns so you can play familiar melodies.

Note that the bass line (the down-stemmed notes, in steady quarters) alternates between the root (C) of the chord and the available chord tone on the fourth string. You'll see this approach in the next three figures (**Examples 4b–d**). Things are a little different in **Example 4e**, because the root of the D chord is played on the fourth string, hence the alternating chord tone will be played on the third string. The tempo indicated for these five examples—and the five that follow—is 152 bpm. That's pretty brisk. Work up to it gradually, using a metronome to steady your pace.

The pattern that serves **Examples 5a–5e** is different in three significant ways. First, in Examples 4a–4e, there's an eighth-note rest at the beginning of each bar—whereas there's no rest here. Second, the melody notes (up-stemmed) in this picking pattern alternate from high to low—the opposite of the previous pattern. Finally, on beats 1 and 3, the bass line is alternating between the root and fifth in Examples 5a, 5b, 5d, and 5e. (Example 5c is the exception to this, because the bass line in a G-chord shape is already root-5-root-5.)

Travis picking isn't the only way to add drive to your solo-guitar tunes and arrangements, but it's relatively easy to get a handle on it and the technique is adaptable to a wide variety of styles. It's an easy fit for country-blues. Make sure to try it someplace unexpected as well—like a jazz or rock song.

Beginners' Tip #2

Being able to groove convincingly at any tempo is an essential skill for solo-guitar playing. Temper your time sense by spending at least 50% of each practice session playing along with a metronome, drum loop, or other reliable beat keeper.

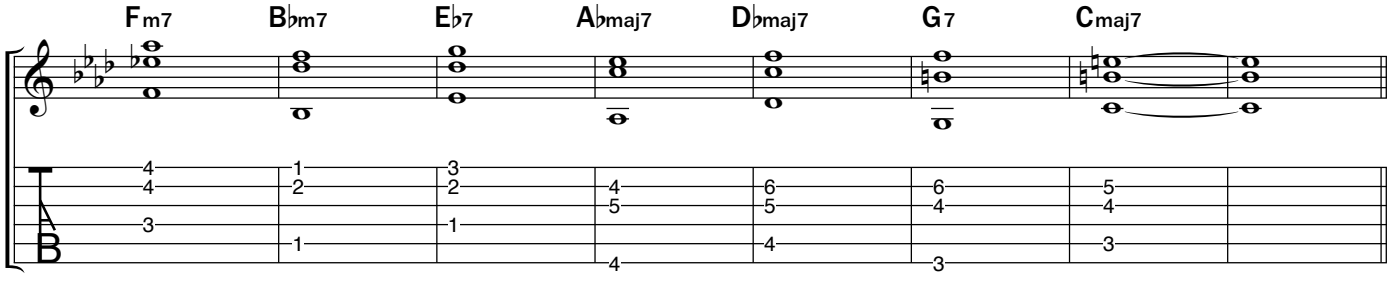
Beginners' Tip #3

Once you think your composition or arrangement is finished, go back through it once more to see if any noncore elements can be stripped away. The simpler your arrangement, the more you can concentrate on the nuances of performance.

WEEK FOUR

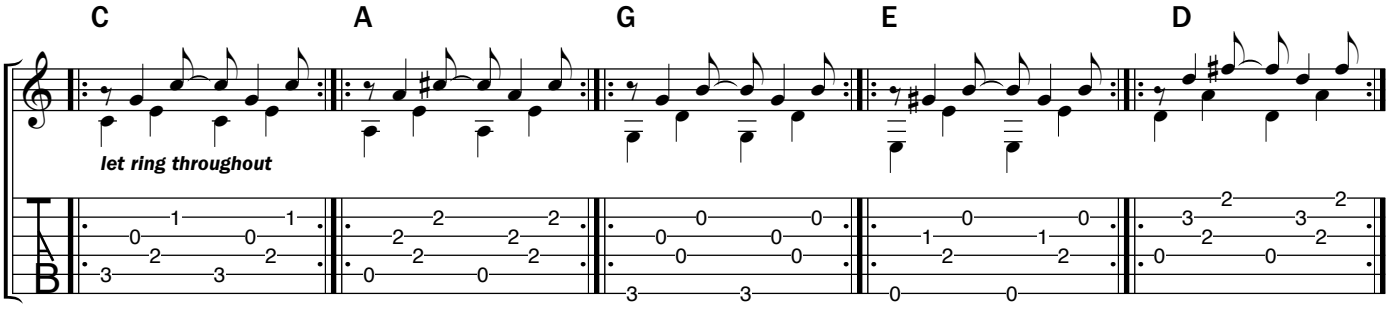
In this final workout, you'll put all of the previous week's lessons to use. The first four bars of **Example 6** incorporate the less-is-more jazz-chord concept from Week Two—that is, the familiar melody is supported only by the root note of each chord plus the chord's third or seventh. As you saw earlier, this approach is uncomplicated yet effective.

Example 3c

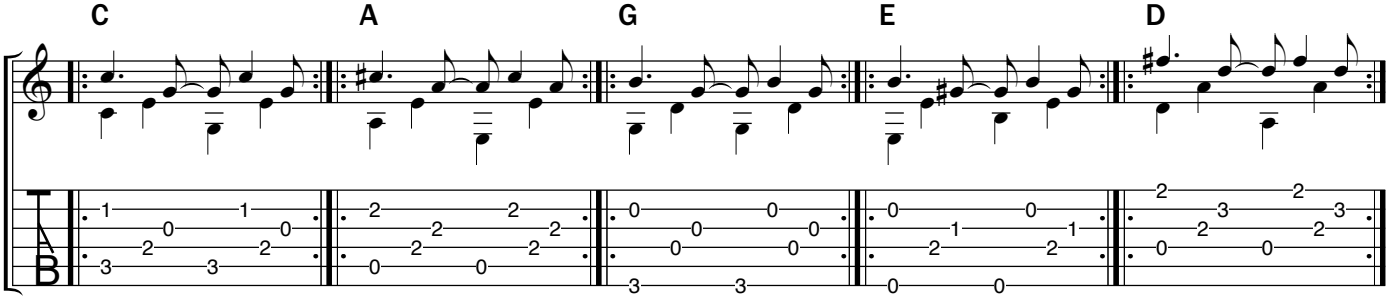


WEEK 3

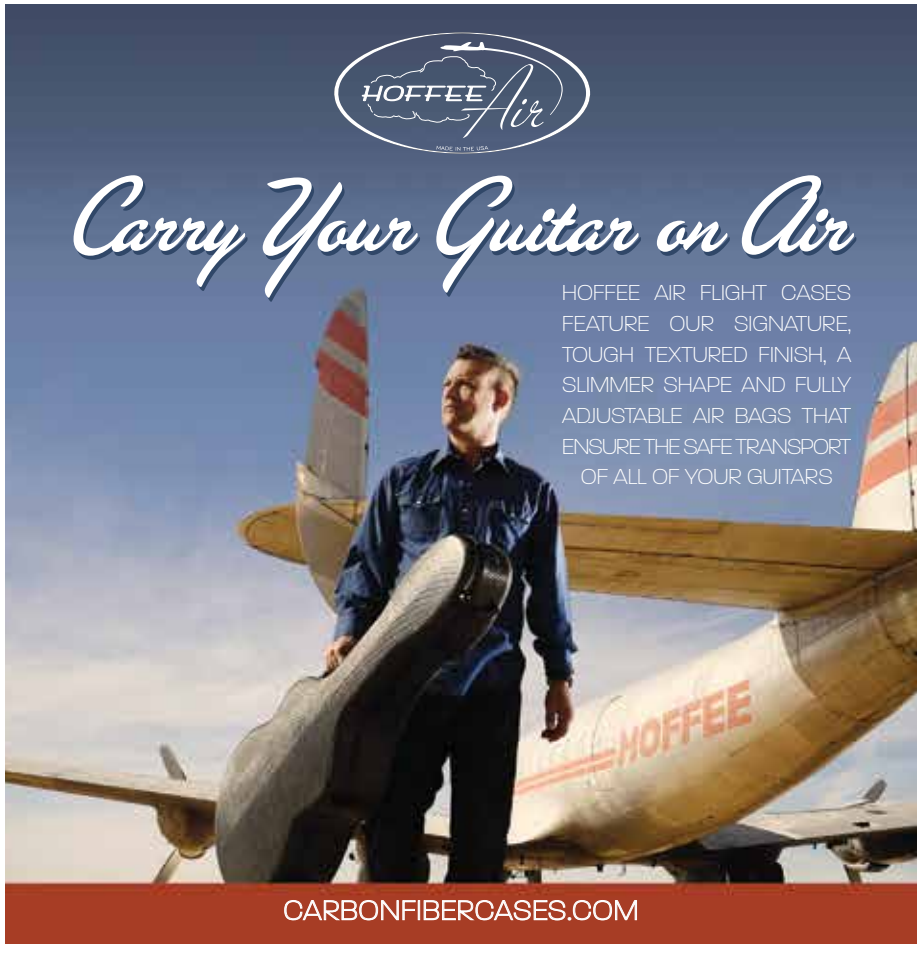
Examples 4a–e ♩ = 152



Examples 5a–e







The next section of Example 6 is played with the Travis-style picking you studied in Week Three. The modulation in bar 5 to the key of A major from G lets the melody and chords ring out while the alternating bass line chugs below. The bass walkups in both endings are a tip of the hat to Merle Travis himself and to Chet Atkins as well.

Beginners' Tip #4

If learning to play standalone guitar is your goal, stay inspired by feeding your ears a steady diet of compelling solo-guitar recordings—everything from classical (perhaps Julian Bream) to ragtime (Blind Blake is a great place to start) to contemporary fingerstyle (Jon Gomm, for example).

The final eight-bar passage of Example 6 is stylistically akin to the Sor piece from Week One. There's less rhythmic activity here compared to the previous section, but the melody and accompanying parts are clear and sweet. This classical-like setting is not terribly different from the jazz approach, in that the chord forms are once again built by supporting the melody with chordal roots. One difference is that the harmony in this section is mostly triadic (except for A7, D7, and G7/B). Another difference is that the bass line (down-stemmed notes) moves a little more independently and has its own melodic integrity—rather than merely being a byproduct of playing the root at the bottom.

There's no Week Five lesson—there never is—but if there were it would be this: Go out and get yourself a weekly solo-guitar gig. Putting in practice time at home is absolutely essential, but if you're serious about playing solo guitar, start doing it for real, in public, as soon as possible. The first few gigs may be rough, but keep at it and keep learning as you go. If your groove needs more work, you'll *know* on the gig because no one's toes will be tapping. If your harmonizations are overwrought, you'll *know* on the gig because you'll find yourself fumbling over awkward grips that obscure the melody. When folks start tapping their toes and humming along without even realizing it, then you'll know you're onto something.

Adam Levy is an itinerant guitarist based in Los Angeles. His work has appeared on recordings by Norah Jones, Lisa Loeb, Amos Lee, and Ani DiFranco, among others. He is also the founder of Guitar Tips Pro. guitartipspro.com.

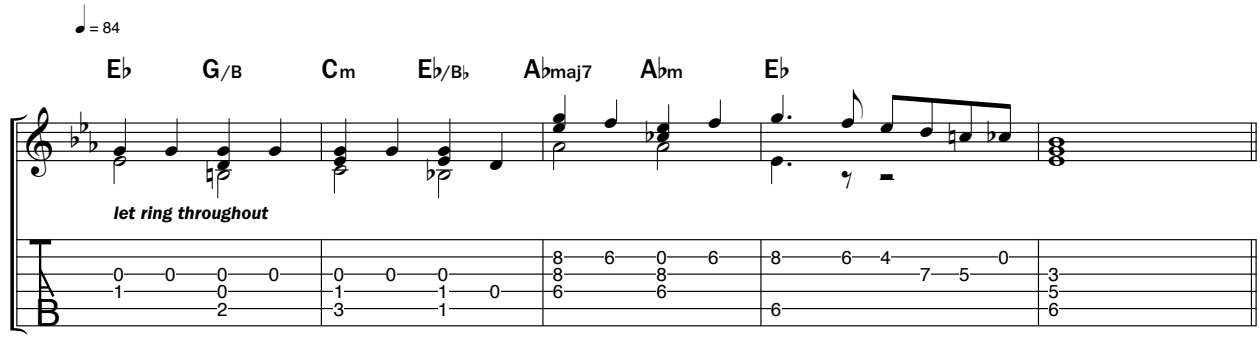
WEEK 4

Example 6 ♩ = 120



TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Throughout this Weekly Workout series, all of the examples have been in the five keys (C, A, G, E, and D) most naturally suited to the open strings of the guitar (in standard tuning). Open strings can be exploited in other keys as well, of course, as this final example in E♭ clearly demonstrates. The melody here is taken from the chorus of the Civil War–era song "Aura Lea." It's easy enough to find use for strings 3 and 4 (G and D) in this key, as you'll see in bars 1 and 2. A little more surprisingly, the second string is also used in this example, in bars 3 and 4—as C♭, not B.



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READERS' PICK



Steve Howe

Clap

Tackling an essential rock instrumental

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

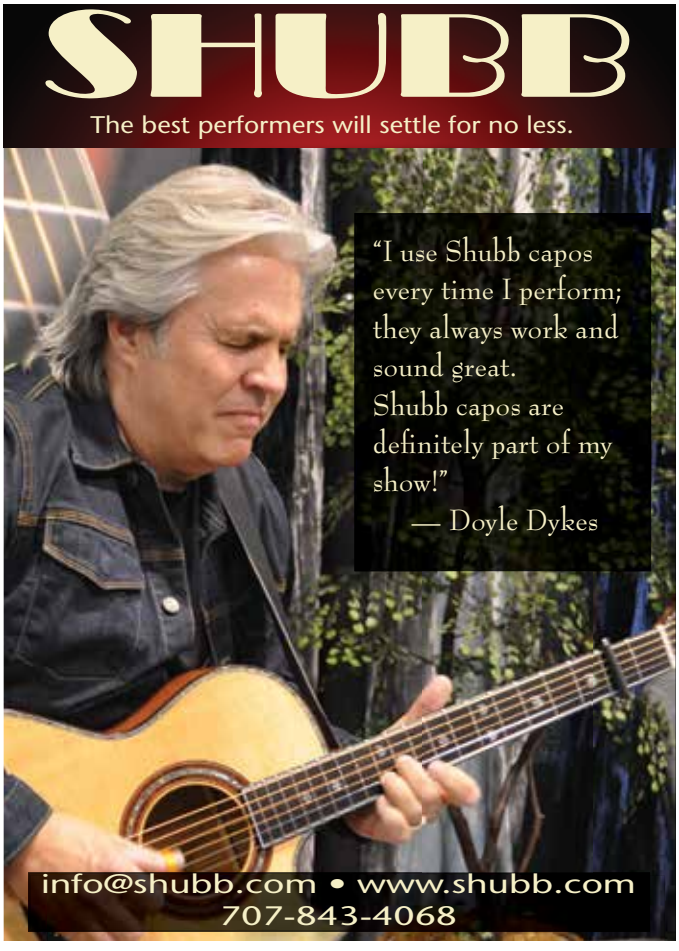
In August of 1969, on the occasion of his first son's birth, guitarist Steve Howe composed his first piece, a solo guitar instrumental. When he presented it to his band mates in the progressive rock group Yes, singer Jon Anderson suggested a title: "Clap."

Howe recorded the piece live at the Lyceum Theatre in London, and Anderson, introducing the performance, misidentified it as "The Clap." So what would prove to be one of the most popular instrumentals in the rock canon would also have an erroneous title when it appeared on Yes' third record, 1971's *The Yes Album*.

I'll refer to the piece by its proper title, as it's been corrected on certain CD reissues. The notation here is a note-for-note transcription of the original recording in its entirety, save for the warming-up bit on an open-A chord at the onset, which isn't part of the composition.

In "Clap," Howe crams a whole lot of guitar into a pop-song-length composition. He wrote the piece with Chet Atkins in mind, and this is particularly evident in the bouncy, syncopated main theme in bars 11–15. Among other highlights are the deft bluegrass-informed fills in bars 27–28 and elsewhere, and the hot cross-picking in bars 134–135.

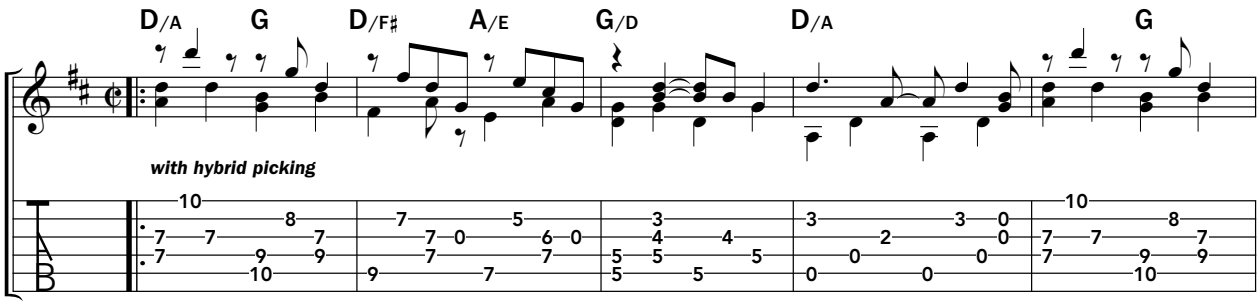
It's always a good idea to tackle a new piece systematically, one bit at a time, and that's especially true in the case of "Clap." Work through it phrase by phrase, or even bar by bar, and don't move on until you can play everything cleanly. Also, don't be overly concerned with playing the piece exactly as written—instead, try to capture its exuberant feel. **AG**

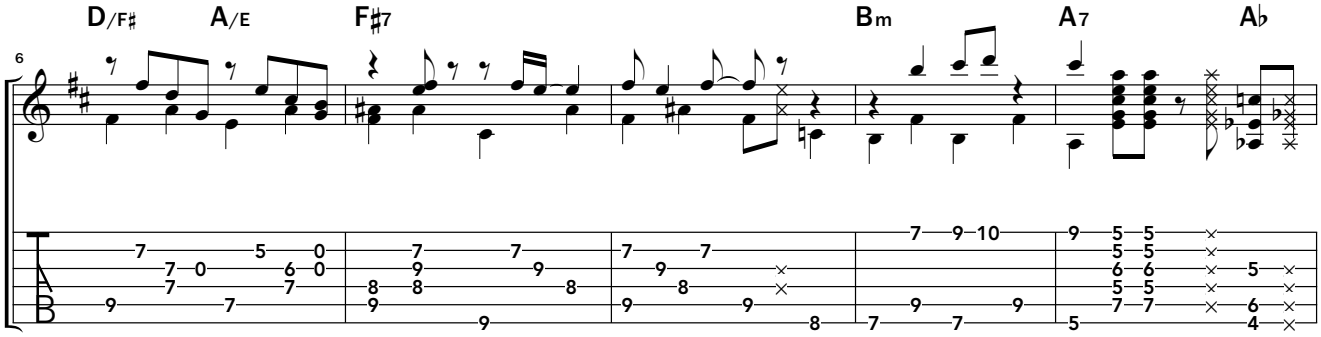


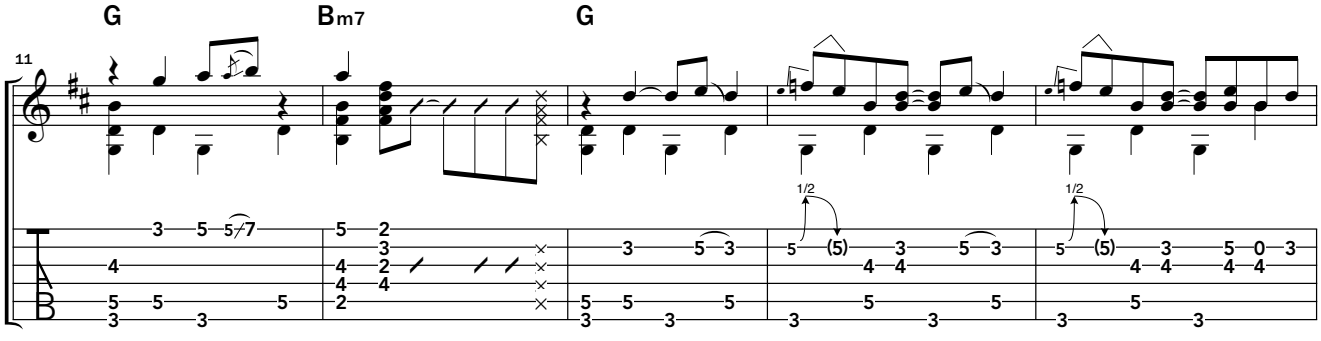


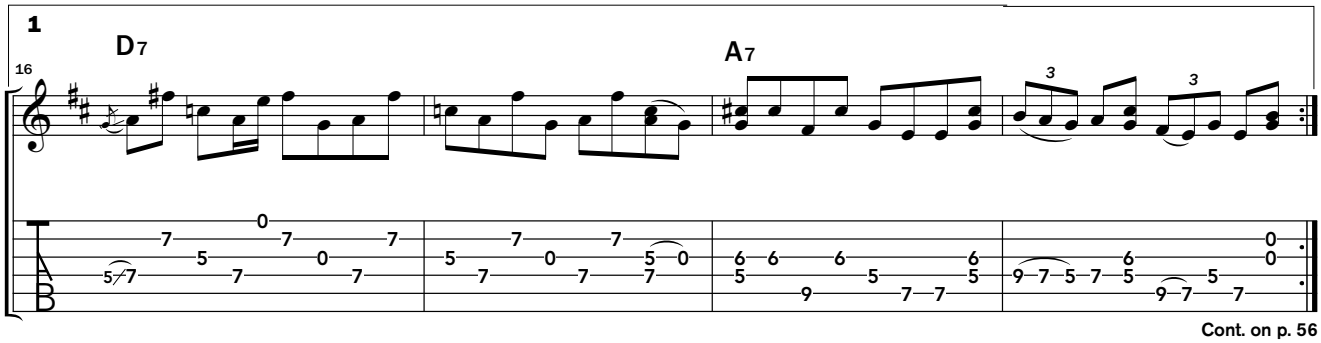
WORDS AND MUSIC BY STEVE HOWE

Moderately fast (♩♫=♩³♪)









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Al Petteway

Midsummer Moon

An instrumental by Al Petteway serves as an excellent introduction to an open-C tuning

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

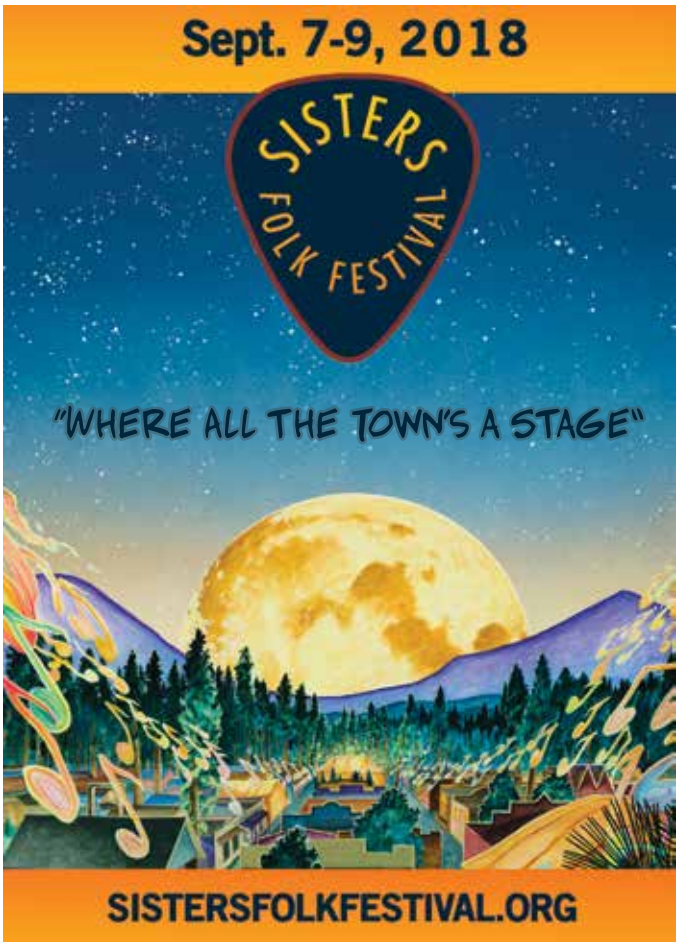
Some 20 years ago, Al Petteway tuned his guitar to an open Csus2 chord—low to high, C G C G C D—and started exploring this rich alternate tuning. He found himself moving two-finger shapes up and down the neck, pitting them against the ringing open strings, and before long a new tune had announced itself.

Petteway was a photo editor at *National Geographic* at the time he composed the piece, and its contemplative atmosphere seemed to match an image, shot by his cohort Sam Abell, depicting the full moon over the white cliffs on the coast of England. This image inspired the tune's title: "Midsummer Moon."

Petteway's studio recordings of "Midsummer Moon" appear on his 1995 record of the same name and on his new album, *The Collector's Passion*. The latter is the source for the note-for-note transcription here.

To learn the piece, tune string 6 down two steps, to C, and strings 1, 4, and 5 down a step, to D, C, and G, respectively; oppositely, tune string 2 up a half step, to C. If needed, use an electronic tuner for accuracy. And note that if you'd like to spend a bit of time in this tuning, it would be best to use medium-gauge (.013) or heavier strings.

Though "Midsummer Moon" might have a boatload of different chords, Petteway, a master of efficiency, frets those in the first 15 bars with just two different grips: his first finger on the fourth-string notes and either his third or second on the third-string notes. Alternatively, you could use your third finger on every note on string 3. All of these chords are played against the open strings, including a pedal (constant) tone—in this case the low open C, which, while easy to play, adds harmonic complexity. AG





Tuning: C G C G C D

Moderate Waltz



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COURTESY OF TR CRANDALL

MAKERS & SHAKERS

TR Crandall Guitars

Tom Crandall repairs and sells vintage and boutique guitars in his Manhattan shop

BY KATE KOENIG

Tucked just north of Houston Street between Avenues A and B in Manhattan's East Village is TR Crandall Guitars. Since opening five years ago, the vintage guitar shop owned and operated by Tom Crandall and his business partner Alex Whitman has attracted customers from down the street and across the country. Whitman handles marketing and retail, while Crandall is the name that drives the business behind it.

Crandall's story about how he got into vintage guitar repair is as unique as the craftsmanship he's become so reputed for. His background in woodworking began in his home state of Minnesota, where he learned in the 1970s from his grandfather—an expert carpenter and cabinetmaker whose clients included comedian Bob Hope. Carpentry was Crandall's livelihood during his mid-to-late 20s, when he decided to go to college and study language and English Renaissance literature. It was while he was pursuing his doctorate at the University of Iowa that he discovered his passion for vintage guitar repair. "I got this vintage guitar that needed work. To me, it was this sort of reverential thing at first. I had to get past that in my own psychology to go, 'OK this is wood, and I know I've worked with wood," Crandall, now 59, says. Once he did, though, "it went from a hobby to not a hobby pretty fast."

Soon, Crandall's apartment was overflowing with the guitars he'd spend his free time fixing. He decided to try to sell them, and set up a table at a vintage guitar show. Immediately, the feedback was overwhelming. "People were saying, 'I've never played one that plays this well! You do this yourself?' And suddenly I was just drafted into it," he says.

Three weeks later, Crandall had received so many calls that he opened a shop in Riverside, Iowa (which sci-fi fans know as the future birthplace of Captain Kirk from *Star Trek*). That was in 1996. Several years later, Crandall took a job with Matt Umanov Guitars in New York. It was there that he met Whitman, and after over a decade working together at Umanov, they left to open their independent East Village location.

One thing is clear in Crandall's recount of his career in guitar repair—his business is borne reliably by word-of-mouth recommendation. In

his workshop downstairs—an overflowing basement that resembles the quintessential craftsperson's creative space—he puts a few rare models in my hands with vicarious kid-at-Christmas anticipation. He shares with me a few rare Gibson Roy Smeck guitars from the 1930s. Crandall has become known for his conversion work on their original necks, which need to be modified from their large, original Hawaiian-style necks for conventional guitar technique. First, he shows me an unaltered 1935 Radio Grande, followed by a Stage De Luxe that he's already converted.

"I took the neck off, I took the fingerboard off, I put a tube of aircraft aluminum in there, tapered the fingerboard to a more navigable size, and then I re-carved the neck in the style of a 1930s Gibson," he says, proud of both his diligent workmanship and the instrument's chance at a new, more playable life. "This will be the ninth one that I've done since we opened the store, which is kind of amazing, because they're so rare." Gesturing to the Radio Grande, he notes that it will be the third such guitar he'd worked on. "I've never even seen another one of these for sale, but three just came to us," he says, laughing.

I ask Crandall what it is that he brings to his work that makes it so highly spoken of. "Attention to detail. I'm a good mimic," he replies. "A lot of repair work gets done on what I call a paint-by-numbers basis. You have to get a sense of what the instrument needs, and approach it accordingly. I intuit the whole instrument." His minimalism and practicality, along with his sensitivity to conservation, is what drives his entire aesthetic. When I ask him what makes him more a fixer than a maker—he does make guitars sometimes, but not often—he replies, "I have this impulse to rescue things. I always think that it's better to take something old and make it work than buy something new."

Crandall, however, is not one for showboating. He carries with him the good-natured, unassuming Midwestern culture he grew up in. But he does take his work very seriously and expresses himself and the principles behind his work calmly and with precision. He'll only use hide glue: "It's the only glue that's 100-percent reversible. You can still do crummy repair with hide glue but at least I can undo it." He'll only work with Brazilian rosewood for necessary repairs: "I won't make a guitar out of Brazilian rosewood—I think it's too fetishized. The fact that it's on the endangered species list—I just don't want to contribute to that."

Crandall believes that Martin's X-bracing is the best tried-and-true design, and the vast majority of newer patterns just don't cut it. "When I make a guitar, I pretty much just use variations on the Martin theme, as far as how I brace a top. I think a lot of people mess around with all these things to try to make their instruments distinctive—I don't know that they make them better."

And while he maintains confidence in what works, he relies heavily on his own adaptability and resourcefulness towards each individual repair. "I have no problem revising my ideas about the instrument as I go along. Just like looking at each instrument as an individual thing. I'm always looking for a better way to do something—a better way to leave fewer footprints or to deal with an issue that's deemed to be irresolvable."

Back upstairs in the shop, he encourages me to stay as long as I want as he brings me various guitars to check out. As I noodle around on a 1931 Gibson L-2, a 1952 Gibson SJ-200, and a 1937 National Duolian, he trades stories about the shop's many prestigious and colorful customers with Elijah Wolf, the 22-year-old recording artist who works the counter. Sean Lennon, Steve Earle, Dan Erlewine, T.J. Thompson, and a couple of Hare Krishnas with a penchant for heavy metal are just some of the people who have stopped by recently. It's important to Crandall to create a friendly environment for customers. "We don't discourage people from coming here and hanging out. People say, 'Hey, I'm going to be in town, let's meet at TR Crandall's and see what they got.' It doesn't have to result in a sale."

And the shop reflects the same welcoming persona Crandall gives off—shown as he shares in my unadulterated glee as I get some faux-amplified harmonics to ring out on the National. That personality pays off when handling his many customers. "I've been told I have a very good bedside manner," he says. "That might be just my physiognomy. But I also never panic," he adds. "Even when things go terribly wrong. 'Cause I haven't been foiled yet." AG

'I have this impulse to rescue things. I always think that it's better to take something old and make it work than buy something new.'
TOM CRANDALL



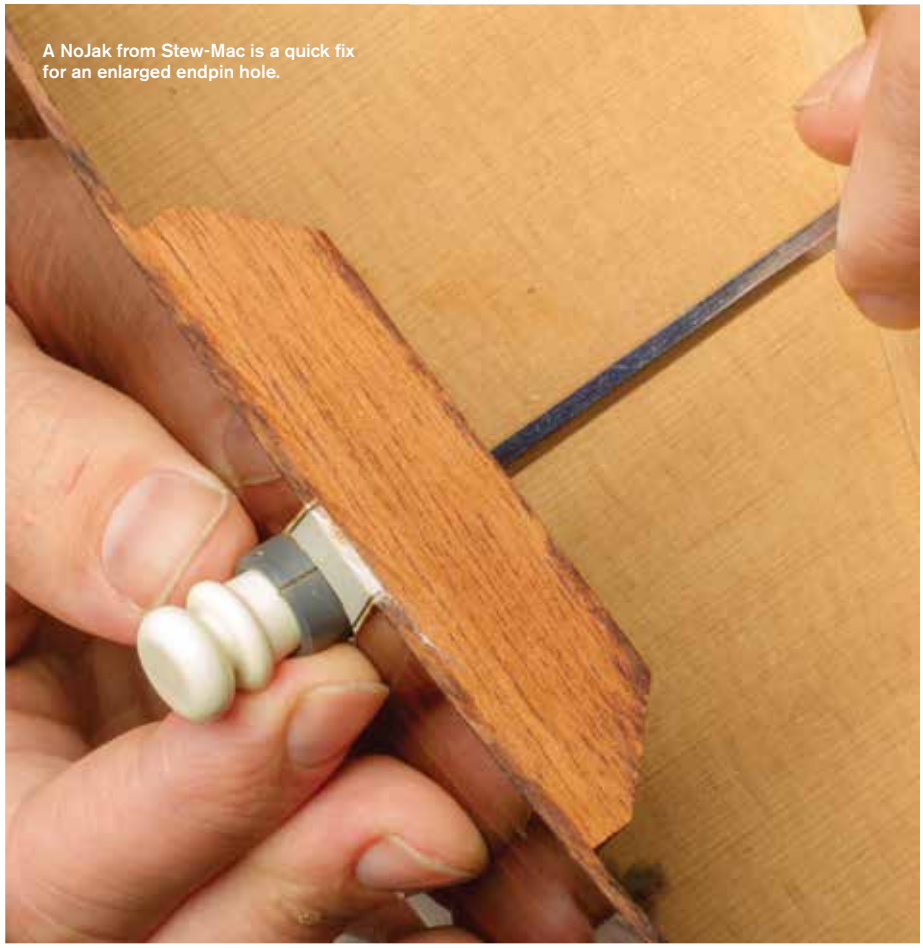
Crandall with a 1935 Gibson Roy Smeck Radio Grande

COURTESY OF TR CRANDALL

Removing a Pickup from an Acoustic Guitar

How to have a usable endpin again

BY MAMIE MINCH



A NoJak from Stew-Mac is a quick fix for an enlarged endpin hole.

Q: *I installed an L.R. Baggs M80 pickup in my 2016 Martin 00-18 shortly after I bought it, complete with routing the endpin hole bigger to accept the output jack. Now that I'm considering removing the pickup, yup, you guessed it, I will be left with an endpin hole larger than the original pin. Can you recommend a solution?*

—Mitch Gittelman

A: Good question, right readers? If you, like our write-in question-asker, have had a pickup installed in an acoustic guitar, you know the process. Whether it's a magnetic pickup mounted in the soundhole (like his), a transducer laid under the saddle or adhered to the bridge plate, an internal microphone, or any combination of the above, an elegant solution is to put your output jack in the tailblock of the guitar. It's standard practice nowadays; the endpin is removed, its hole is reamed out to be about 1/2 inch wide and the jack is fed through and held sturdily in place. This style of jack comes with a strap button you can screw down over the part that sticks out, so you can use a strap just like when you had an endpin.

People ask me different versions of this question often when they're deciding whether to put a pickup in their acoustic guitar, and sometimes their decision hinges on it. Maybe the guitar is vintage, or beloved, and they can't imagine reaming a big hole in it that can't be undone. It can be a quandary, of course, because they really could use it onstage, but they can't bear to do something they might later regret.

In lots of ways, I advise people to do different things that make their guitars more useful—and therefore more valuable—to them. If having the ability to take your guitar onstage and play with other musicians is something you need, I think we should be able to figure out a way to do it. This ethos is important to me—the instrument and its value to *you*, as the player, is the real priority.

Just to talk it out, one theoretical solution would be to bush the hole, meaning you fill it—exactly—with a plug made from the same wood. (Violin techs do this with tuner holes in the pegbox all the time.) Of course, it takes a bit of doing, you need the right tools, there would be finish involved, and often it's not a real, practical fix.

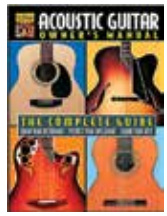
A simpler, cheaper, more applicable solution that I like for undoing this 1/2-inch reamed hole is an item made by Stewart-MacDonald, and it's called the NoJak. It's an oversized endpin that is made up of three parts: an expanding sleeve that fills up the diameter of the hole, an endpin, and an Allen key–driven bolt that pulls the sleeve over the taper of the endpin, snugging it deeper and expanding the sleeve the more you turn. We use them at our shop all the time. It works great, is invisible from the outside, and is reversible, so you could change your mind or try a different pickup. I'd call that elegant. AG



Mamie Minch

GOT A QUESTION?

Uncertain about guitar care and maintenance? The ins-and-outs of guitar building? Or a topic related to your gear? Ask *Acoustic Guitar*'s resident repair expert Mamie Minch. Send an email titled "Repair Expert" to Senior Editor Greg Olwell at greg.olwell@stringletter.com, and he'll forward it to Mamie.



If *AG* selects your question for publication, you'll receive a complimentary copy of *AG*'s *The Acoustic Guitar Owner's Manual.*

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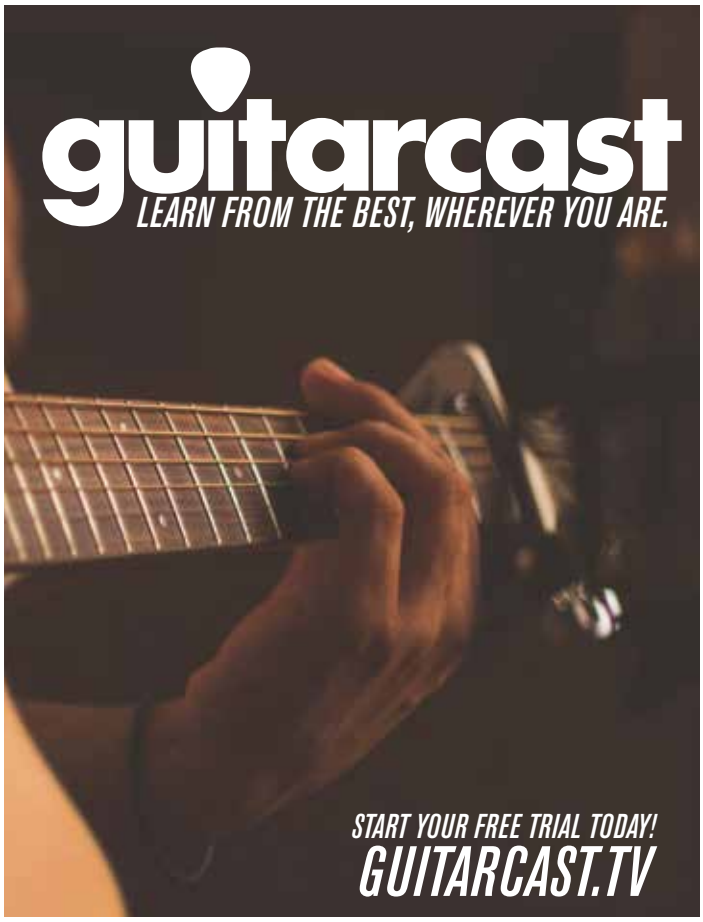
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Martin 000-15M StreetMaster

Rootsy vibes and warm tones in a distinctive guitar

BY GREG OLWELL

While creating a finish that looks older and (a lot) more lived-in is still relatively new in the guitar world, antiquing a brand-new instrument has been the norm in the violin world for centuries. In spite of my love for a guitar that's come by its playwear honestly, I couldn't help but find myself pulled to the look and sounds of the Martin 000-15M StreetMaster again and again.

TAKING IT TO THE STREETS

Martin says that it made the StreetMaster series, which also includes an identically priced dreadnought version, for the working musician. But the Martin 000-15M Steet-Master, with its distinctive distressed look, is an all-solid-wood guitar sorted out with a suite of cool features that would be easy for any guitar aficionado to fall for.

As part of Martin's 15 series, the Street-Master has a satin-finished all-mahogany body and mahogany neck, A-frame X-bracing, Martin's simplified dovetail neck joint, and no binding. The StreetMaster is very similar to Martin's popular 000-15M, with a few notable differences, such as a katalox fingerboard and bridge, and no pickguard on the ready-to-rumble finish.

Maybe because it looks like it's already lived a little, I didn't feel the need to baby the StreetMaster during our time together. Even with several other guitars nearby, I found myself reaching for it when playing through the music in this issue, learning new songs, or just strumming a few chords while watching TV. The modified low-oval shape and Martin's standard taper made the neck very comfortable, and the triple-0 size body felt good tucked under my right arm for fingerpicking or flatpicking.

As you might expect from an all-mahogany guitar, the StreetMaster has miles of clarity and focused fundamentals, and a strong mid-range with a dry throatiness on the lower mids. The highs are sweet and not too bright and the bass is not too boomy, which all adds up to a guitar that seems like a great companion for singers and fans of a full, balanced tone that's not too potent in any direction.

The easy playability and rich tones of the Martin 000-15M StreetMaster kept calling me to play it and the faux-distressed finish kept me from feeling too precious about it. In other words, it's a fun guitar that you won't want to put down. AG

















MARTIN 000-15M STREETMASTER

BODY 000-size, 14-fret all-mahogany body; non-scalloped A-frame X-braced top; katalox belly-style bridge with compensated drop-in bone saddle; satin distressed mahogany burst finish

NECK 25.4"-scale mahogany neck with dovetail neck joint; 20-fret katalox fingerboard with abalone diamonds-and-squares short pattern position inlays; 1-11/16"-wide bone nut; Golden Age Relic nickel tuners with cream knobs; satin finish

OTHER Martin SP Acoustic 92/8 Phosphor Bronze Light (.012–.054); soft gig bag; available left-handed

PRICE $1,799 (MSRP); $1,399 (street)

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Taylor Builder's Edition K14ce Grand Auditorium

Taylor debuts its new V-Class bracing in a stunning guitar

BY GREG OLWELL

Taylor Guitars has built its empire on changing how guitars are made—from the way forests are managed to instrument construction to sales. As it has shown before with its bolt-on neck and CNC-made models, players will show up if the guitars play and sound great. With its new V-Class bracing (see "V Marks the Spot" on p. 16), the company is betting that players will embrace its latest innovation the way they have those that came before it. This moment has been a long time coming for Taylor, as the new bracing system points to a future where all of the company's major guitar components will come from the minds of its own visionary luthiers, and not be reengineered or modified versions of something Martin did a century ago.

While its sounds may not be a huge departure from what you might expect from Taylor, the company's new Builder's Edition K14ce, on review here, is a stunning instrument with a refined sound full of surprise and opportunity for guitar players. I spent a few months with the K14ce to see if it lived up to the build-up and reveal. During this time, I spent many hours playing and listening to it from the driver's seat. I also wanted to hear it from the listener's perspective, so I slipped it into the unsuspecting hands of nearly every guitar player I met, from Piedmont blues specialists to gypsy jazz experts, from modern fingerpickers to electric guitarists who rarely touch acoustic instruments.

Nearly all of us noticed that this new Taylor was different from any guitar we had ever played. You could watch the slow realization as each player noticed that it seemed capable of sustaining notes in the middle of the fingerboard that are usually ho-hum, or how its dynamic responsiveness was unusually even and smooth as picked notes went from delicate to vigorous and back. However, for all of these good things you want in a guitar—sustain,



volume, and evenness—if my time with the K14ce is any indication, the chief benefits of Taylor's new V-Class-braced guitars are the things that you *don't* get: choked notes, dead spots, muddy chords, and imprecise intonation. We guitarists have learned to live with these eccentricities of our instrument, but the new V-Class bracing is showing me that I don't have to. Unless I want to.

What's not surprising about the K14ce is that it sounds like a Taylor, with a bright, clear, very high-definition version of a guitar tone—like a refinement of Taylor's principles of precision that sheds some old ideas for a new ideal. What does surprise me is the piano-like evenness among strummed chords, arpeggios, and multi-octave single-note lines. To my ear, all are exceptionally even and balanced, with no notes puttering out or dominating. They're just *there*, present in your music.

Plugging the guitar into several different amps and PAs all created the same result: It was simply one of the best, most fully figured, and accurately reproduced sounds I've heard yet from an acoustic guitar with an onboard transducer-type pickup. Taylor's Expression System 2 electronics always seemed like a pickup system that produced a reliably good tone, but this pickup/guitar combination seems to work as one. It sounded like *this* guitar, played by *this* person, and the effect really came across best when played through a high-fidelity PA.

The new Taylor Builder's Edition K14ce Grand Auditorium is a genuine innovation in the history of acoustic guitars.

And much like we've come expect from Taylor, the K14ce is comfortable and easy to play. At about 4.4 pounds, this guitar is light, and, with smoothed edges everywhere (beveled ebony binding, integral armrest, and Powers' newly designed cutaway), it's easy to bond with. Looks-wise, it's mostly a stunner, from the extensive abalone inlays around the body to the vine fingerboard inlay to the tinting of the spruce top. I find koa's natural golden-honey colors and variegated figure spellbinding, so I was a little disappointed in the darkness of my tester's special new "Kona burst" finish, which masked much of the wood's natural beauty and rippled figure.

The new Taylor Builder's Edition K14ce Grand Auditorium is a genuine innovation in the history of acoustic guitars. It doesn't make every other guitar obsolete, nor will it suit every player's tastes, but even dedicated vintage-guitar fans will have to recognize that its sustain, volume, and responsiveness ignite curiosity and playfulness. It takes the guitar's sound to a polished place that makes you want to explore and see what it—and its player—are capable of. Over a few minutes you'll likely discover that it's not only one of the best-sounding Taylors you've ever played, it may be one of the best sounding guitars you've ever played. **AG**



TAYLOR BUILDER'S EDITION K14CE GRAND AUDITORIUM

BODY Cutaway Grand Auditorium shape; torrefied Sitka spruce top with V-class bracing and relief rout; koa back and sides; West African ebony binding with fiber/koa/paua inlay, top, back, and rosette; West African ebony bridge with Micarta saddle and green abalone–tipped ebony bridge pins; "Silent satin" finish with "Kona burst" on the back and sides

NECK 25-1/2"-scale mahogany neck with 20-fret West African ebony fingerboard, with koa and ebony binding; spring vine inlay; 1-3/4"-wide black graphite nut; gold Gotoh SGL510Z tuners with 1:21 gear ratio

ELECTRONICS Taylor Expression System 2

OTHER Beveled cutaway; beveled armrest; strap buttons; Elixir Phosphor Bronze Light strings (.012–.053); Taylor deluxe hardshell case, brown

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Tech 21 Acoustic Fly Rig

Rig-replacing ultra-portable pedal offers essential acoustic tools and effects

BY BILL LEIGH

In 1989, a decade or so before the arrival of the first digitally modeled amps and effects, Tech 21's Andrew Barta introduced the analog SansAmp tube amp emulator. This pocket-sized provider of tube-like tone facilitated plugging electric guitars into mixers for amp-free direct recording or performance. The latest deployment of the now-seasoned SansAmp is the Acoustic Fly Rig, a five-button featherweight that lets you plug your acoustic guitar direct into a PA mixer, recording console, or computer recording setup. You can also use it with an amp, either plugging straight into the input as you would any effects pedal, or into the amp's effects return to bypass its preamp section. Further, the Acoustic Fly Rig offers essential tools and bonus effects tailored to the amplified acoustic player.

The Acoustic Fly Rig is the newest of Tech 21's Fly Rig series, which is based on the notion that if you're called on a fly-away studio or performance gig, you'd only have to pack your axe and this sprightly stompbox, which weighs in at a slim 1.3 pounds. At 12-1/2 inches long, there's a decent chance the Acoustic Fly Rig will fit in your gig bag pocket. Once set up, the Acoustic Fly Rig acts like a souped-up DI or acoustic preamp, delivering a high-quality, low-impedance signal that's ready to be plugged into a mixer channel and drive longer cable runs without degradation. On top of that, there's a compressor, a boost function, a powerful 3-band EQ with sweepable mids, reverb, and chorus or delay with tap-tempo time control. And of course, there's the tuner/mute, whose importance can't be overstated. For controlling feedback, there's a phase flip switch and a notch filter knob, sweepable from 70Hz to 350Hz to help tame wild rumbles. A sweepable low-pass filter (LPF) rolls off unwanted top-end frequencies and artifacts.

The Acoustic Fly Rig comes in a handsome rectangular tin, which makes for a pretty sweet unboxing experience. It's powered by an AC adapter, so you may want to throw a power strip into your carry-on, too. Our tester was an appealing burnt orange with a shiny metal finish that sometimes made it difficult to make out button labels when the unit was on the floor, but it wasn't really a problem once I got used to the footswitch functions. Tech 21's custom footswitch actuators feel firm and springy, with no audible click. In addition to the footswitches, there are rugged rubber push-button toggles for settings you won't need to step on mid-performance, like ground lift for the XLR output, phase flip, and some of the effect settings. Small, sturdy, translucent knobs line up across the top, each illuminating in section-specific colors to indicate when that section or function is engaged. The blue knob on the left, E.Level, doubles as a clip warning, flashing red when the unit is overloaded. Like most stompboxes, the 1/4-inch input is on the right, with 1/4-inch and XLR outputs at left.

Accordingly, you can follow the signal chain from right to left. It starts with phase flip, which combats feedback by reversing the output signal so it's out of phase with the input signal. Next are the compressor (COMP) and boost, both of which have dedicated footswitches. For the compressor, Tech 21 chose analog, FET-based circuitry for warmth and transparency. You could crank up the compression control for a squashed, sustain-heavy sound, but I liked dialing in just enough to keep loud strumming tight and controlled and make fingerpicking pop. A level control sets the compressor's output. It's pretty sensitive, so I kept it below 12 o'clock to avoid feedback, and kicked in the boost button to stand out during solos. The



variable boost control lets you set just how much you want to show off, up to 12dB.

The SansAmp section is the heart of the Fly Rig. You can disengage it with a push button, but keep it on for plugging in direct to PA and recording mixers. It's nice that Tech 21 included the option of turning the SansAmp off, but keeping it on has another advantage: That's where the robust EQ and filters are. My main guitar for singer-songwriter performances is equipped with an L.R. Baggs Lyric pickup, which captures the instrument's prominent, baritone-like lows, crisp top end, and relatively scooped mids. I routed it through the Fly Rig into a mixer and a loud powered PA speaker. The Fly Rig 's EQ section was tremendously helpful in balancing out the guitar's conspicuous bottom; I gently cut lows and swept the midrange EQ to emphasize a sweet spot, then boosted the highs a smidge for better articulation. The guitar's voice boldly came through without overpowering the room, while still leaving plenty of hi-mid sonic space for my tenor voice. When I turned up the PA, the notch filter helped bridle emerging feedback. With this guitar, I kept the low-pass filter set fairly high, but I cut it back a bit when strumming a brighter, janglier acoustic, which also benefited from light compression.

The middle footswitch turns on reverb, which is next in the signal chain. You can choose between small room and large hall reverbs, and there's a dedicated knob for dialing in the reverb amount. The larger setting had a big, spacious sound with audible echoing reflections when the reverb knob was dimed. My favorite recipe was the small room with reverb set straight up at 12 o'clock. This gave me a sound so warm and natural that I almost forgot it was on—until I turned it off.

The digital effects section, or EFX, is last in the signal flow, presenting a toggle choice of chorus or delay. You can turn effects on or off with the second footswitch from the left. Aside from the effects level knob (E.Level), the chorus effect has no controls—so don't expect to concoct wild waves of modulation. Instead, it offers a single shimmery sound that's useful and very pleasant, if a tad subtle. It sounded a bit like two guitars, or a 12-string guitar blended with a six-string. The delay effect yields a much greater variety of sounds, owing to the knobs that set delay time and the number of repeats. The delay time, which helpfully can also be set by tapping the tempo on the far left footswitch, can range from a doubled sound or rockabilly slapback to a delay of about a second. Repeats can go from a single echo to what initially seem like infinite resonant clones, but they eventually start to fade. For both effects, E.Level sets how much the effect is blended in with the clean signal.

There are a couple more useful features: Hold down the final footswitch to mute the signal and turn on the tuner, which has a very easy-to-read display. The 1/4-inch output jack doubles as a headphone jack; just mash the headphone button and the output gets louder and drives both sides. Just don't use the headphone setting when plugged into a mixer!

Overall, the Acoustic Fly Rig is a terrific tool for acoustic guitarists. It's well built, it operates extremely quietly, it has potent EQ and effects, and it has a few things that every amplified acoustic player needs—like feedback-controlling features and a tuner/mute. All that, plus it's extremely portable, and much easier to carry than an amp. Though I boarded no planes during my time with the Acoustic Fly Rig , I definitely felt like I was flying in friendly sonic skies. AG

TECH 21 ACOUSTIC FLY RIG

KEY FEATURES Sweepable, semi-parametric active EQ controls; compression, reverb, delay, and chorus effects; chromatic tuner; anti-feedback control; 1/4" input and output; XLR output with ground lift; 9-volt DC power supply (included)

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John Oates with the Good Road Band
Arkansas
(Thirty Tigers)

PHILIP MURPHY

PLAYLIST

A Blues Journey Worth Taking

Pop/R&B legend digs deep into classic country blues on satisfying set

BY DERK RICHARDSON

With *Arkansas*, John Oates—yes, *that* John Oates, of the '70s and '80s hitmakers Hall & Oates—delivers what will likely endure as the most surprising roots-music release of 2018. You might not expect the guitar-playing half of the duo that gave us "Sara Smile," "She's Gone," "Rich Girl," and "Kiss on My List" to harbor deep knowledge of the traditions embedded in such old-time music bibles as Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music,* but here he is, on an album originally conceived as an homage to Mississippi John Hurt, essaying heartfelt, musically rich renditions of eight blues, ragtime, gospel, and bluegrass standards from the late 19th and early-to-mid 20th centuries, plus two well-matched originals. Hurt is represented with "My Creole Belle," "Stack O Lee," and "Spike Driver Blues," and name-checked in Oates's "Dig Back Deep." "Anytime," recorded in 1924 by Emmet Miller, opens the album, while Blind Blake's "That'll Never Happen No More," Jimmie Rodgers's "Miss the Mississippi and You," the bluegrass-tinged gospel song "Lord Send Me," "Pallet Soft and Low" (later reworked into "Atlanta Blues" by W.C. Handy), and Oates's title track fill out the pithy 33-minute program.

Hall & Oates scored a half dozen number one hits, so Oates, turning 70 this year, knows how to craft polished, accessible "product." Using Addiction Studios in Nashville, he and co-producer/engineer/mixer David Kalmusky made the Good Road Band—mandolinist Sam Bush, pedal steel player Russ Pahl, electric guitarist Guthrie Trapp, bassist Steve Mackey, cellist Nathaniel Smith, and drummer/percussionist Josh Day—sound like a practiced hybrid, somewhere between the acoustic simplicity of Jim Kweskin and Geoff Muldaur and the shimmering snarl of a great John Hiatt band. Contrasts abound: The driving "Pallet Soft and Low," with Wendy Moten soaring into Merry Clayton territory, is almost Stones-like in its thick, blues-rock arrangement; it's followed by a tender, "Miss the Mississippi," which lopes along sweetly in a chamber-folk mix of acoustic guitar, bass, cello, and pedal steel.

Grit is a primary component of Oates's singing, which is splintered around the edges but (blue-eyed) soulful at the core. His phrasing and melodic leaps are miles, or decades, removed from that of his Platinum-certified pop-singing partner, and these songs are that much more compelling for it. But most unanticipated—and just as critical to the recording's appeal as his engaging, unpretentious voice—is his guitar playing. At once intricate and relaxed, Oates's syncopated acoustic fingerpicking rolls along with the confident ease earned by someone well-versed in ragtime, Piedmont, Mississippi Delta, bluegrass, and country idioms, as well as the specific styles of Hurt, Blake, Big Bill Broonzy, Doc Watson, Chet Atkins, and Merle Travis.

Arkansas will stun longtime fans who still have "Maneater" ringing in their heads, and it won't add much to the numbers Hall & Oates have racked up over the decades—40 million records sold, 13 Platinum and Gold albums—but its wonderful repertoire and sincere and modestly virtuosic delivery will yield many spins of listening pleasure. **AG**



Tommy Emmanuel

Accomplice One

(GCP/Thirty Tigers)

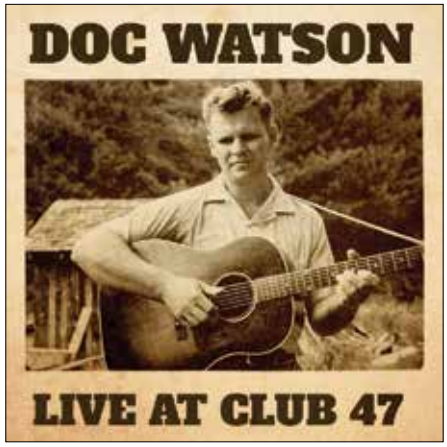
Friends bring out guitar slinger's best

Accomplice One is Tommy Emmanuel's chance to duet with some of his favorite musicians, showing off in a range of styles from bluegrass ("Watson Blues") to Celtic ("St. Anne's Reel"), jazz ("Djangology"), pop ("Borderline"), rock ("Purple Haze"), and soul ("Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay"). Of course, the playing is jaw-dropping awesome, and the partners he's picked—including Jerry Douglas, David Grisman, Jorma Kaukonen, Mark Knopfler, Jack Pearson, Jake Shimabukuro, J.D. Simo, Bryan Sutton, and Frank Vignola—push him to new heights.

Where do I start? There's Emmanuel playing the Delmore Brothers' "Deep River Blues" in full-on Doc Watson mode, with Jason Isbell sharing vocals. There's the trio with Grisman and Sutton, who make Duke Ellington's "C Jam Blues" sound like it was written for guitar and mandolin. There's Emmanuel trading licks with Kaukonen on "Saturday Night Shuffle," creating harmonies Merle Travis could have only heard in his dreams.

Emmanuel's having fun, and these collaborations clearly bring out the best in everyone. Rodney Crowell unpacks a new song, "Looking Forward to the Past," that's among the sharpest he's written; Mark Knopfler digs into his trunk for the sly "You Don't Want to Get You One of Those," which he and Emmanuel use as a tribute to Chet Atkins; and the album's quieter moments, like the reels with Clive Carroll, the Gypsy jazz with Frank Vignola, and the lullaby with Jake Shimakaburo, are equally as good, finding Emmanuel playing at the top of his game.

—Kenny Berkowitz



Doc Watson

Live at Club 47

(YepRoc)

Vintage Doc, before he hit it big

No one did it better than the late Doc Watson, whether he was Travis-picking "Deep River Blues" or dishing a folksy talking blues. The newly reissued, mostly solo acoustic, *Live at Club 47,* delivers 26 intimate, riveting tracks, including four previously unreleased outtakes. The album was recorded at a small café in Cambridge, Massachusetts, shortly before Watson's breakthrough appearance at the 1963 Newport Folk Festival, which led to the release of his landmark 1964 debut solo album on the Vanguard label and refashioned the face of folk guitar.

Throughout, Watson sings and plays guitar, harmonica, autoharp, and banjo. He is joined on five tracks by guitarist John Herald, and on two tracks by mandolinist Ralph Rinzler.

In his liner notes, Steven Weiss, curator of the Southern Folklife Collection, which funded this reissue, opines: "This is Doc, paying his dues and playing his heart out, performing two sets of classic, old-time country songs he learned as a child from his family and from old 78 RPM records."

Watson shares his love for these rustic songs—a kettle of folk, country, blues, gospel, bluegrass, and fiddle tunes, both originals and covers—during homespun stage banter, noting at one point that the A.P Carter chestnut "Wabash Cannonball" comes from "far enough back that it's got whiskers on it." After playing a master class-worthy hybrid-picked rendition of the blues classic "Sitting on Top of the World," he quips without a hint of immodesty: "I believe that guitar can sing it better than I can."

—Greg Cahill



Mikkel Ploug

Alleviation

(Songlines Recording)

Bold choices pay off on inventive disc

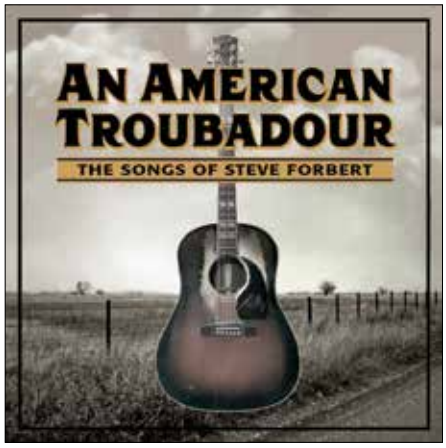
The well-worn acoustic guitar featured on Danish guitarist Mikkel Ploug's solo album *Alleviation* is as much a creator of this collection as its player. Built in America during World War II, the all-mahogany Gibson boasts a warm, ringing tone that inspired Ploug, best known for his chamber jazz trio Equilibrium, to explore finger-picking, open strings, and playing fewer notes. This stripped-back technique does not mean Ploug is averse to experiments. His strumming on "Florescence" mimics a grand piano's rich resonance as he makes the Gibson's strings vibrate in ever-tightening coils.

On the set's title track, Ploug adapts American guitarist Ben Monder's technique of superimposing a tricky meter over a steady pulse. Subdivisions of five ride atop the tune's 3/4 time signature, creating an effect like opposing currents in a river—a whirling eddy borne downstream.

"Couleurs d'Olivier" plays with Olivier Messiaen's modes of limited transposition. What starts out sounding like a series of scales turns into a climbing composition with shimmering picking. In contrast, "Einer" is a straightforward folk melody that spotlights the Gibson's subtle highs, mellow midrange, and hearty bass. Ploug alternates his crisp attack with effortless slurs in a style that recalls the playing of Bert Jansch.

With its start-and-stop rhythms, "Gruntvig Reflections" sounds like freestyle, but is in fact Ploug's meticulous transcription of a prayer. Here, Ploug's breathing and the percussive click of his fingers sliding down the frets are accentuated. It's as if the merging of uncommon guitar and inventive player has become complete.

—Pat Moran



Various Artists

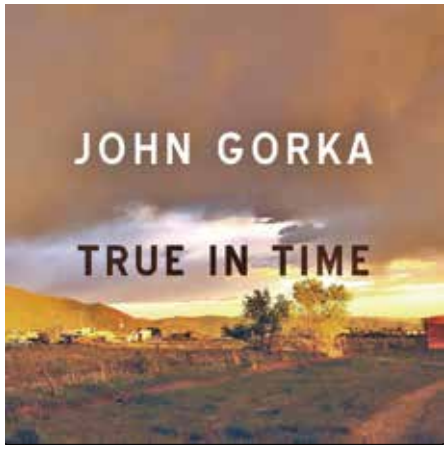
An American Troubadour: The Songs of Steve Forbert

(Blue Rose Music)

Brilliant songwriter gets worthy tribute

Shortly after he hit the charts in the mid-'70s with the lyrical lover's plea "Romeo's Tune," Mississippi-born pop singer-songwriter Steve Forbert became cursed with the sobriquet "the next Bob Dylan." He never lived up to that expectation, but he did enjoy brief success on the US and Canadian charts. His well-crafted, country-inflected, and highly personal songs have been covered by Rosanne Cash, Marty Stuart, Keith Urban, and others touched by their vivid imagery and deep emotional content. *An American Troubadour: The Songs of Steve Forbert* features a host of Americana artists—including John Oates, Robert Earl Keen, Jim Lauderdale, and Todd Snider—paying tribute to Forbert's work.

Nicki Bluhm & the Gramblers contribute a sultry take on "Romeo's Tune." Kelly Fitzgerald lends her ukulele to a whimsical reading of the self-deprecating "Thinkin'." On the hard-rocking "I Blinked Once," Oates teams up with the gritty singer Bekka Bramlett, daughter of Southern rockers Bonnie and Delaney Bramlett. Amy McCarley gives a powerful acoustic reading of "Cellophane City," the Springsteen-worthy nod to the broken dreams of the working class and one of the album's best tracks. "It Isn't Gonna Be That Way" gets the Texas border treatment, as Keen showcases Forbert's knack for encapsulating life's small disappointments with a sense of resolve, but not a hint of bitterness. These stunning songs leave you wondering why Forbert isn't a household name, but ultimately you can hold these gems close to your heart, right where they belong. *—GC*



John Gorka

True in Time

(Blue Chalk/Red House Records)

Reliable songwriter "sounds like an old friend"

Though John Gorka's "new folk" sound of the 1980s helped pave the way for the rise of Americana in the '90s, his career has been relatively low profile in comparison to such contemporaries as Lyle Lovett and Robert Earl Keen. But it certainly has been steady. Combining the warm, reassuring vocal virtues and songwriting craftsmanship of James Taylor and Guy Clark, the even-keeled New Jersey native sounds like an old friend on his 15th solo recording.

The 13 performances here are based on Gorka's understated acoustic folk-guitar picking, sometimes unaccompanied, more often arranged with keyboards, drums, bass, electric guitars (Dirk Freymuth), and pedal steel and National steel guitars (Joe Savage). Background vocals (by Jonatha Brooke, Eliza Gilkyson, Lucy Kaplansky, and others) put additional velvet around Gorka's everything's-gonna-be-alright voice, deep within which resides a melancholy loner, a romantic, and a cynical joker. Three songs written years ago—"Blues with a Rising Sun" (addressed to Son House), the cowboy tale "Red Eye & Roses," and the concert staple "The Body Parts Medley"—fit seamlessly with nine newer ones, including loping story-songs, sharp character studies, tender tunes about hearts "Tattooed" and "Crowded," and references, both compassionate and shrewd, to wounded aspects of contemporary culture and politics.

Although Gorka's sound lacks the Nashville/Texas twang and rock 'n' roll edge that has put alt-country at the forefront of indie roots music, *True in Time's* mellow ensemble playing, hummable melodies, and clever lyrics sound both comfortingly familiar and delightfully fresh. *—DR*



Camille Nelson

Lead Me Home

(Stone Angel Music)

Fingerstyle playing shines on spiritual collection

It would be a mistake to pigeonhole Camille Nelson's *Lead Me Home* as "praise music." Though the collection features traditional and original hymns in lush arrangements for acoustic guitar and string ensemble, Nelson's winding and fluid fingerstyle playing is a joy to behold regardless of the listener's faith (or lack thereof).

The arrangements, mostly by Nelson, are full but uncluttered, making room for contributions by Ryan Shupe on fiddle and mandolin, Nelson's brother Steven Sharpe Nelson (of the Piano Guys) on cello, and Alex Sharpe (formerly of Celtic Women) on ethereal vocals. However, Nelson and her trio of custom guitars remain front and center. The strings soar on "Amazing Grace," but remain tethered to Nelson's silvery yet robust picking on her Stonebridge/Furch.

In a style similar to her former teacher Kaki King, Nelson draws on the resonating treble of her Taylor to enfold and cradle the cantering melody of "Be Still My Soul." DADGAD tuning and the woody bass tone of yet another Taylor—a 524ce with a 12 -string neck—enrich one of Nelson's original tunes, "Patterns of Light," on which her picking dances like shadows cast by a guttering candle. And Nelson employs a percussive thumb technique on "Israel, Israel, God is Calling" to thread an earthly path through a cloud layer of sighing strings that seem to represent the spirit world.

On *Lead Me Home,* the message may be Christian, but the appeal of Nelson's virtuosity is limitless. *—PM*

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The Maple Leaf Forever Guitar

Toppled historic tree turned into guitar by Dave Fox

BY DAVID McPHERSON

A massive windstorm struck Toronto in July 2013 and felled the Maple Leaf Forever Tree, the 170-year-old silver maple that inspired Canadian poet and songwriter Alexander Muir to write "The Maple Leaf Forever"—unofficially considered Canada's first national anthem. The fallen tree was cut into pieces, dried in a kiln, and seasoned for nearly a year before it was tendered by the City of Toronto to projects that reflected the revered tree's cultural history.

For one of these projects, Canadian musician and vintage-guitar collector Colin Cripps enlisted an old friend—Peterborough, Ontario–based luthier Dave Fox—and in 2015 the two collaborated to build the Maple Leaf Forever Guitar shown here.

"I was very specific in what I wanted in terms of design, materials, finishing, and details," Cripps explains. "The structural identity of the guitar is modeled directly off a classic 1944 [Banner era] Gibson J-45. Dave's superb craftsmanship, combined with the materials used, make it not only a historic piece, but a great guitar."

The instrument features a Sitka spruce top with a spalted maple rosette and a celluloid "tiger-stripe" vintage-style pickguard. The guitar's back and sides are made of silver maple from the Maple Leaf Forever Tree. The neck is constructed of a five-piece laminate composed of walnut and silver maple. The headstock overlay is Honduras rosewood with a pearl inlay and features Waverley vintage-style open-back tuners. The fretboard and bridge are also Honduras rosewood, finished with celluloid dot inlays. Other unique details include twin maple leafs inlaid at the fifth fret, and a 2014 "Maple Leaf Forever" $10 silver coin on the back of the headstock.

The MLF guitar is now passed on to a different musician each year—it's currently in the hands of Canadian singer-songwriter Royal Wood—adding to the legacy from which the instrument was born and making sure it remains in the public trust. AG



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DAVE FOX AND JEN SQUIRES

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